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Reading Comics: Analysing Language, Culture and the Concept of Superheroes in Comicbooks

by

Mila Francsica J. Bongco ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy*

Department of Comparative Studies and Modern Languages

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 1995

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Para sa mga mahal ko,
at sila ring nagmamahal sa akin:
Ate, Yoyo, Kibby, Raffy at Marie
Little Sam, Abbie. Andrea, Joby at Symon
At higit sa lahat, kay Jan.

Sa inyong tiwala at tiyaga,
Maraming-maraming salamat.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes comics within the frameworks of semiotics and cultural studies. The aim is twofold: 1) to explore the qualities of comics primarily as a distinct form of creative expression, and 2) to situate its reading within the constant de-centering and re-centering processes in contemporary cultures while analyzing subsequent ramifications for culture, ideology, textuality, audience and narrative. To this end, a review of the development of critical discourses about comics is provided, as well as their relationship to the wider context and concept of "popular culture." It is clarified how the origins of certain sorts of judgements about popular culture as irrelevant or debased must be seen in their historically shifting relations to dominant cultural forms, and how the identification of comics as "popular culture" represents a critique of the categories for the description of the cultural forms and relations in the twentieth century.

Factors such as class, gender, race and age, as well as the conditions for text production and articulation, affect the definition of a social or cultural as "popular." As an example, the development of the superhero comicbook as a genre is seen vis-a-vis its extra-textual environment--from the pragmatics of production and consumption which may have shaped the contours of the texts, to issues of ideology and language which may be perceived in the characters and the narratives of the texts. Few forms of comics narrative have enjoyed more widespread popularity than superhero stories, and few have been seen so consistently seen as proof positive that popular culture enforces the values of some dominant ideology. The figure of the superhero is widely perceived as espousing hegemonic truths--a prime example of a State's henchman, repetitively restoring order in aid of policemen and politicians. However, this study shows how the presence and polarity of superheroes and the superhero genre involve a critique rather than a celebration of a given society's judicial system. Increasingly reflecting the complications in modern day society, many recent comicbooks portray justice and law as provisional, incomplete and virtually unenforceable by a state increasingly incapable of understanding its complexity.

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Introduction

The growing interest in the examination of popular culture attests to the range of issues subsumed within one of the more exciting spheres of critical study currently gaining prominence in Academe. The study of popular culture is receiving increased attention not least because it allows for expansion in the scope of human expression and activity subjected to critical scrutiny. In addition, it is provocative since it highlights a wide range of radically different ideological perspectives among cultural critics and points to an observable crisis within cultural life. One is forced, for example, to come to terms with the fact that an "official" centralized culture is increasingly difficult to identify in contemporary societies, and that aesthetic standards may be proven to be variable, even subjective, rather than immutable and universal. Inevitably, the antithesis of high and low art, even the concept of art itself, must be re-examined. More significantly, appraisal of the disparate ideologies which compete to define what may or may not belong to the realm of culture and art accentuates the many conflicting factors involved in the construction and perception of cultural products. Questions of hierarchy, legitimacy and approbation permeate the scrutiny of all aspects of popular culture. Nowhere are these questions more apparent than in popular narratives which, due to the use of "language" in creating and re-presenting reality specifically aimed at a mass audience and functioning in an atmosphere of immediacy, easily lend themselves to ideological inculcations and configurations.

Popular narratives like the detective novel, romance and social melodrama, cinema and film have generated a great deal of critical analysis recently. Comics have not been studied as extensively, but are as interesting and as important, for they occupy a major position in the communication and reading preferences of modern society.[1] By their very accessiblity and ubiquity, comics have necessarily contributed to the fashioning of the imagination of the society which contains them. Conversely, as a medium intended for mass consumption, the comics must cater to popular wishes and demands. The comics, then, is a form of cultural and social expression indispensable to the study of popular culture and literature, especially in a modern society replete with competing discourses each of which proffers a specific reality and potentially conflicting ideologies.

This study examines comics in general, and superhero comicbooks in particular, within the frameworks of semiotics and cultural studies. The aim is twofold: 1) to explore the qualities and potentials of comics primarily as a distinct form of creative expression, and 2) to situate its reading within the constant decentering and re-centering processes in contemporary cultures while analysing subsequent ramifications for culture, ideology, textuality, audience, and narrative. To date, most studies of comics have focused on how they reflect or relate to society and the culture out of which they have grown, while many have emphasized comics' dubious effects on society. Only recently has attention been directed to analysing the formal and structural aspects of comics, and in the process, clarifying the concepts and definitions useful in studying the medium. This study hopes to reclaim comics from the censure customarily present in the commentaries about them and demonstrate that the art of the comics does merit and need new forms of critical analysis. This form of critical analysis, to be demonstrated below, will appreciate the qualities and potential of the comics as a unique means of expression and communication, and also as an example of an art form that can actively participate in the concerns of cultural studies. In the process, this inquiry shall also participate in the current attempts in studies of communication and mass media discourses to re-define and recuperate the many concepts and terms which have previously trivialized the concerns of these disciplines.

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[1] The following conventions for the generic designation of comics and comicbooks will be used in this study: comics shall be used for the genre, and comicbook/s shall refer to the subgenre. In Chapter Two, the rational for attempting to isolate "comics" and "comicbooks" as separate generic categories will be explored.

One major difficulty in studying comicbooks is the almost impossible task of attaining complete collections of the comic strip or comicbooks under scrutiny. Comicbooks have been generally viewed as ephemeral publications which cater to illiteracy and contain little or no cultural or historic value. Consequently, they have not been collected or preserved systematically for the purposes of scholarship.[2] Recently, especially in the United States and France, research centers and institutes have been established for the collection and study of comics as important cultural and social documents of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, the incompleteness and inaccessiblity of primary sources still remains a major obstacle for the analyses of comics at the present; this difficulty applies to the present study as well. As a result of this difficulty, among others, the present study will make no claims to comprehensiveness but will, instead, attempt to focus on some of the critical issues pertinent to an ongoing investigation of this genre.

The majority of examples for this study will be comicbooks from the United States and general observations and comments will be limited to these; no history or survey in its entirety is attempted (although references are provided in cases where previous works exist for such overviews). There are specific comicbook texts and/or characters for which close critical analyses are provided, specifically those of Superman and the Batman. The choice of these particular primary materials is explained in the respective chapters where they are discussed. Most choices are not based on any intrinsic merit, but more often because sufficient numbers of issues were available for perusal or because pertinent information about them is available.

---

[2] Systematic collection of comicbooks has been done more with regards to their value as a commodity. Interestingly, it is the same transitory nature that has also made it difficult to study them that has made them valuable in the comicbook collecting market.

The first chapter provides an outline of the criticism customary to comics and argues for the study of comics within the frameworks of cultural studies and semiotics. It is suggested that such an approach will provide a more comprehensive critical framework for understanding the complexity of both the production and the reception of comics within contemporary cultures. This strategy serves two purposes: to diverge from the traditional negative critique of comics and to circumvent the confining limits of traditional literary studies in investigating a cultural product such as comicbooks. In the process, the history of comicbooks in the United States is traced to provide an idea of the context and subject of criticism. Chapter Two will elucidate on the Language of Comics, highlighting the study of comics as a narrative mode: it is a tangle of "competing languages," comprising both graphic and verbal signs. "Reading" comics involves the pictures and their meanings in addition to the accompanying words. The key to understanding comic art does not lie in the words or pictures alone but in the interaction between them. The expressive potential and uniqueness of the medium lie in the skillfull employment of not one but two sign systems. Interestingly, the relations between the divergent "languages" of comics reflect the simultaneously competitive and complementary relationship which exists between comics and other genres, other popular forms of expression, other forms of literature. The next chapter provides an outline of the responses to comicbooks by critics and the general public in relation to those assumptions and ideological perspectives which inform the concept of popular culture. The focus is on showing how the perception of the "popular" as impermanent and inferior has had consequences for the reception of comicbooks, particularly in the critics' assessment of them.

Chapter Four utilizes the concepts of a generic approach to analyse superheroes by providing a short history of the context and activities in the rise of the superhero within the genre. In analysing the definition of a superhero, some heroes of American comics such as Superman, Captain America, Spider-Man, and the Batman will be studied in the context of the form of masculinity offered in these texts. The portrayal of women in superhero texts will also be investigated, as well as their role in relation to the superheroes. It will be argued that superhero comicbooks delight in displaying chaos and criminality which belies the usual perception of these texts as merely espousing the ideologies of a dominant culture. Chapter Five follows this line of thinking and concentrates on analysing the generic changes in the portrayal and conceptualizing of superheroes in the comicbooks of the 1980s. Textual examples for this chapter will be culled from more recent graphic novels, particularly those labeled "Suggested for Mature Readers," which clearly exhibit different concerns from the prevalent escapist themes of more popular comicbooks. Examination of new characters and novel themes will be based on the works of Frank Miller, Alan Moore, and Neil Gaiman, among others. The Batman, Black Orchid, the Sandman and the heroes in *Sin City* and *Watchmen*, will provide the main focus and examples for analysing the new breed of superheroes.

At the moment, comic art seems to be slowly shedding the cultural disdain normally attached to it and making its mark as an expressive new artistic form. Recently, comics have been attracting not only more serious critical attention but more serious artists who are increasingly expanding the potentials of comics as a narrative medium while addressing more profound topics not usually associated with comicbooks. Respectable book clubs, such as the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Quality Paperback Book Club, are beginning to include selected comicbooks in their offerings. This recent confluence of good artists and good critical reviews in the area of comics may yet work to cast off decades of critical scorn and cultural marginalization which have long arrested the medium's development. As modern culture becomes less print oriented and more visual, the comicbook may become more and more attractive as a narrative form. Art Spiegelman, Pulitzer Prize winner for his comicbook *Maus*, once commented: "All media are as rich as the artists working inside them".[3] As comics comes of age in America, its potential may now be limited only by the creativeness of the artists willing to risk working in it.

---

[3] Interview with Art Spiegelman in *Time* (November 1, 1993): 65.

Chapter One

Comics, Co-mix: Review of Scholarship in the Field

> Once upon a time there were the mass media and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives for those who were not prisoners of the mass media. Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.
>
> Umberto Eco
> *Travels in Hyperreality*
> 1986

Critique of Comics

In the last two decades, there has been a substantial increase in the quality and quantity of serious critical attention given to popular art forms, especially as manifested by the increasingly sophisticated studies of cinema, television, and popular fiction like detective novels, science fiction, and romances. However, a considerable dearth in comparable studies about comics remains. Superficiality has characterized much of the critical literature on comics longer than on most other popular forms. I believe this superficiality is closely connected to the nature of comics readership, generally acknowledged to be a group even more marginalized than the consumers of film, television, or popular fiction: these are children, young adults and, in non-industrialized nations, the poor and not-so-literate. The association of comics primarily with children, adolescents, and the sub-literate is apparent in the profusion of books, articles, reviews and outright attacks on comics. These attacks may be characterized as the "effects and influence tradition" of mass media critique which concentrates on the possible harmful effects of substandard and unchecked entertainment on malleable minds.[1] Traditional criticism about comics reflects the pattern of ambivalence in the attitude toward mass media in general. Exceptions may be allowed, but the tendency is to assume that the overall influence of mass media on society is dangerous and, therefore, their role in people's lives is to be distrusted. Indeed, an outline of usual criticisms directed at popular forms of expression, and comics in particular, shows the general trend that on the rare occasions when commodity entertainment has been taken seriously, the conclusions have been uniformly censorious. Among the most famous and virulent attacks against comics is, for example, Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* which was published in 1954. Wertham criticized American comicbooks indiscriminately as inherently sensational, trivial and illiterate, depicting too much sex, violence and anarchy, and asserted that the practice of reading comics led to juvenile delinquency.[2] The only other two lengthy discussions about comicbooks published before 1960, those of Gershon Legman and Geoffrey Wagner, echoed Wertham's disapproving appraisal of comics: "Legman, Wertham and Wagner compete in their merciless castigation of the comics, heaping blazing coals upon them for their excesses of violence and gore, their often unwholesome treatment of sex, and their frequently low level of writing and drawing."[3] Legman, an authority on dirty jokes, the dirty limerick and erotic folklore, highlighted action and violence in comics to suggest a generic link between violence and adventure comics, instead of placing these comics against the general background and history of graphic brutality in mass media. Indeed, the eruption of comics in the 1940s and 1950s was no spontaneous growth and is better seen against the general backdrop of increasing production and popularity of pictographs after the war. What was unique was their mass production and easy public access to them, not their content. Unfortunately, the rise of comicbook production coincided with a time of extraordinary attention to juvenile delinquency. The climate of the postwar era exhibited an uncommon concern over criminal behaviour infecting America's youngsters; movies, dime novels, radio programmes, magazines, television shows and comics were all suspect. Of these, comicbooks were the most affected as Wertham's provocative book, together with his active crusade against comicbooks, incited public indignation and set off a campaign which took the form of local pressure from parents' groups, religious groups and the like. All this resulted in the public forum of the Senate Hearings under Senator Kefauver into possible links between the comics and juvenile delinquency.[4] The Senate Hearings on comics were a part of a bigger investigation into crime and adolescence that lasted a decade. Twitchell (1989) provides an explanation of why comics took the brunt of the repercussions of these delinquency examinations:

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[1] There have been intermittent attempts to sanitize the thematic and graphic contents of comics which have been directed for the most part against comic books, not comic strips (for a thorough investigation--and reinterpretation--of the major complaints against comicbooks, see Martin Barker, *Comics: Power, Ideology and the Critics*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989). The publication requirements of the latter--they are considerably shorter, usually appear in daily or Sunday newspapers, and are subject to editorial regulations of these periodicals which target a wider range of audience than comic books--have rescued the strips from the cultural hostility the comic books have suffered. On the other hand, these requirements have set more limitations for the comic strips and in general, the strips cannot match the graphic spectacle of the books.

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[2] Wertham, Fredric, *The Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart and Wilson, 1954). Seen from outside the context of postwar America of the 1950s, it is amazing how such an unsound and unscientific piece of research could have been so powerful. There are now many critics who probe the import of this book on comics. Among them, James B. Twitchell extensively quotes Wertham and illustrates the flaws and inconsistencies in his reasoning, as well as exposes some purposeful misreadings by Wertham. See "Disorderly Conduct Illustrated: The Rise and Fall and Rise of the Comics," Chapter Four of *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989): 129-80. Wertham's book is also discussed at length in Chapter Five of Martin Baker, *A Haunt of Fears: the Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London: Pluto Press, 1984) especially in relation to the insiduous use of the concept of "identification" in the criticism of comics; as well as the problems this concept embodies.

[3] Lupoff, Dick and Don Thompson, eds. *All in Color for a Dime* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1970): 17. The other two published discussions were sociological studies of comics by Gershon Legman, *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship* (New York: Breaking Point, 1949) and Geoffrey Wagner, "Popular Iconography in the USA," in *Parade of Pleasure* (New York: Library Publishers, 1955).

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[4] For information on the American campaign, see in particular James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987). A great deal of information and argument about this campaign is also to be found in any of the general histories of American comics. To be fair to Wertham, he never advocated a blanket censorship. In fact, he published his protestations about the arbitrariness of the Code and how America would be better off if it did not exist. However, by this time no one was listening. "Contrary to common belief Wertham's political orientation was in fact liberal. He is often painted as a puritan, even a fascist, but in his earlier life, he had campaigned against the abortion laws and for freedom of speech. He was a supporter of Civil Rights and opened the first psychiatric clinic in Harlem (charging less than the going rate because the locals were poor). Thus, in one sense, his opposition to blanket censorship was in keeping with his overall political philosophy" in Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1993): 280.

> The large media were protected from criticism in two ways. They were parts of American industry, important conduits for the flow not so much of information but of advertising. The sponsors of radio crime shows--cigarettes, toiletries, automobiles--were loath to give up their audiences. The movie industry could always claim its audience was self-selective, and in fact, the industry surveys of the audience of 1950 showed that only the people with sufficient disposable income and time to go to the movies were those between twenty-two and forty. Television was no menace--yet. Kids could not watch what was not there. Saturday morning TV did not carve out an audience until the late 1950s . . . The other protection for mass media was that audiences were as unwilling to give up their entertainment as advertisers were to give up their audiences. The democratizing effect of electronic media meant that programming was done for the largest possible audience, and that audience, by its very nature, was too big to budge.
>
> Almost by elimination, the comics were left standing alone; they were never able to align themselves with any interested parties, having no untainted supporters who could vouch for them . . . But the real reason comic books proved such a huge target was that the hands turning the pages were so young, so male, and so easy to discipline--at least initially. Here was where the juvenile delinquency virus must be entering the body politic, and here is where it must be eradicated.[5]

Although the campaign against comics and the ensuing Senate Hearings did not lead into actual laws bannning comics, the pressure forced many publishers out of business. More significantly, however, it set off a large comics scare which spread beyond America, and caused the self-censoring attempts of the comics industry which proved fatal to the medium's growth and development. Although comics developed differently in Europe, North America, Asia and Latin America, the comics scare in the US in the 1950s--more specifically the crusades against American crime and horror comics which resulted in a destructive self-censorship--rippled through to many other countries. In Britain, for example, the campaign succeeded in getting an Act of Parliament passed which made the publication or distribution of "horror comics" illegal. In many other countries, these American comics threw up shockwaves of anger and demands for censorship. Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Germany, and The Netherlands each had their national version of an anti-crime and horror campaign.[6]

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[5] Twitchell, *op cit.*, 135.

Meanwhile, the "sanitized" comic books in the US survived the public furor of the 1950s, and in fact proceeded to something akin to a renaissance in the 1960s: sales went even higher than the monthly publication of 150 million copies in 1954. Most of the superheroes that are popular to this date were invented in the 1940s but were revived and re-fashioned around this time. Many were featured in their own comicbooks instead of being portrayed together with other characters. By the 1970s, it was hard to ignore the popularity of comicbooks, which even extended their ubiquity as comicbook characters were transformed into action figures, masks, posters, ashtrays, mugs, boardgames, university mascots, and so on, to initiate a collection craze. The continuous rise in the number of comics being produced, sold, and read by the 1970s was accompanied by a substantial increase in the attention to American comics, both as strips and books, in journals, magazines and even books. In general, however, these publications are surveys and histories, mostly nostalgic and/or celebratory rather than analytical. One exception is Les Daniels' survey *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America*, which provides a sensible outline of major developments in comicbooks.[7] Another, and perhaps the most significant, analysis of American comics at this time is Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comics*, a study of the Disney comics and an indictment of Disney as a prime carrier of "cultural imperialism;"[8] this study is well-researched and well-argued, and often cited as a paradigm of Marxist cultural analysis. Culling examples from both comic strips and books, Reitberger and Fuchs examine the social significance of comics, investigating broadly how comics propagate images and ideas that play up to prejudices in *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*.[9] Maurice Horn published thematic studies--*Comics of the American West* which is a heavily illustrated survey of the major Western comic strips and books and their basic symbolic themes; *Women in Comics* which provides an initial study on the representation and roles of women in comic strips and books; and *Sex in the Comics* which includes many illustrations, most of which come from the comics of the Underground culture of the 1960s.[10]

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[6] In his Notes and References to Chapter I of *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics, op cit.*, 303), Martin Barker provides information on articles relating to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Germany.

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[7] Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971).

[8] Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (New York: International General, 1976). Barker (1989) praises Dorfman and Mattelart as a "model
of propriety when it comes to giving references" since a general frustration in studying comics is the incompleteness of references, especially inattention to details in dates and edition numbers of the original materials.

Despite such studies as these, however, it remained clear that comics could not evade the notoriety established by some critics as a form deleterious to readers. Just as the image of mass media as a monolithic and malevolent force persisted to dominate discussions of mass communication, the general tone of comics analysis underscored its role in the moral and cultural decline of modern society. Although this decade also saw the beginnings of more critical examinations of comics with a Marxist, feminist, or psychoanalytic slant, the majority of the works on comics remained weighed down by the apprehensions of educators, parents, child psychiatrists and moralists. Comics criticism in the United States noticeably lagged behind the focus and the methods applied at this time to the studies of cinema, television or popular fiction as art forms or narrative media. In part, the strict restrictions of the Comics Code did not allow comics the creative freedom enjoyed by the other media, and the comicbooks that flooded the market were trapped in the trifling problems and conflicts in a universe of costumed superheroes or "funny" talking animals. In complying with the Code's insistence of "good" always vanquishing "evil," comics tended toward the representation of oversimplified conflicts which led to thematic and generic stagnation. Despite these efforts, however, the Code cannot be blamed entirely for the minimal developments made in comics as a narrative form. In *Comic Books as History*, Joseph Witek analyses the effects of the Code on the development of comic books as a medium for a more sophisticated audience and reminds us that:

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[9] R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs, *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium* (London: Studio Vista, 1972). Translated from the German *Comics: Anatomie eines Massenmediums* published by Rowolt Taschenbuecher.

[10] Horn, Maurice, *Comics of the American West* (New York: Winchester Press, 1977). *Women in Comics* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1980). This book provides good visual examples but disappoints in critical depth. A third one is *Sex in the Comics* (New York: Chelsea House, 1985).

> To bash the Comics Code is easy enough: . . (B)ut it is important to remember that the Comics Code was not imposed on the industry by the government. In fact, its provisions make hash of the First Amendment and could stand no legal test. The Code's rules are not laws; they are self-imposed industry guidelines, and as such they simply codified the existing editorial leanings of most American comics. E.C.'s powerfully written war comics failed because of lagging newsstand sales, not because of the meddling of the Comics Code, and while the Code killed off most of the sophisticated American comic books, for many other comics the Code simply meant business as usual. The Code officially ruled out overtly mature treatments of adult themes in American comic books, but few such books existed anyway, and to blame only the Comics Code Authority for the lack of serious literature in comics

> form is to badly underestimate the puerility of the comic book publishers and of the mainstream comic audience.[11]

Partly as a reaction to the Code and the acquiescence of mainstream comics producers and consumers, comic books that increasingly went beyond the thematic and narrative possibilities approved by the Code developed within the counterculture of the 1960s. These Underground comix, as they became known, cultivated an outlaw image and deliberately aimed to offend the sensibilities of bourgeois America. They defiantly opposed the sanitized views and values of middle class society proffered by their traditional counterparts. Instead, they offered biting parodies and satires of media and social customs as alternatives. Bound neither by the Code nor by any need to appeal to a wide audience, the Underground cartoonists had the incredible luxury of almost unrestricted artistic freedom. The "comix" then became the principal outlet for the works of artists who were innovative and who rebelled against the restraints of the Code, thereby stretching the limits of what "comics" could be. Amidst the shameless obscenity and bad taste that abounded, several striking talents did emerge from this movement and much highly original work was accomplished. Though as a widespread cultural and artistic force, it lasted barely a decade, the Underground comix is a crucial phase in the development of comicbooks as a narrative form and a means of artistic expression. This was the first significant group of comic books in the United States aimed at an entirely adult audience, and many artists who are now major figures of comicbooks and who realized the potential of comics as a narrative form for serious themes and issues came from this movement. Critics agree that the roots of the new, fact-based comicbooks that have recently emerged in the United States may be traced to the Underground comix, "not only in the works of such established artists such as Robert Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, and Kim Deitch, who still create comicbooks, but also in a growing number of comicbook creators who take from the Undergrounds new visions of possibility for comicbook narratives but without that antagonism toward a general audience which so often led to the self-ghettoization of the Underground comix."[12]

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[11] Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1989): 50.

For a long time, much positive innovation in the comics was curbed by the conditions that dictated comics production and consumption: either they were mainly puerile adolescent entertainment or marginalized defiant magazines of the counterculture. Didactic comic books with definitely wholesome social aspirations also existed: these included biblical re-tellings, inspirational biographies, educational manuals, and historical legends. The most well-known would be the educational series by the Gilberton Company including the *Classics Comics* and *Classics Illustrated* which were redactions of literary works and popular stories. However, these were generally more expensive and not as popular as the regular comics although many played on combining the informational and sensational with presentational patterns analogous to the comic-book industry's stock-in trades. The comics that held the public's attention, especially in the 1970s, were those that related to the two extremes: simplistic superhero fantasies or flagrant violence, anarchy and salaciousness. For the critics, it was uncomplicated to forego analyses of the artistic merits of comics and continue focussing on its "effects and influences" since the choice between approval or disapproval was almost prompted by the developments in the medium itself. Even in the absence of a specific critical rationale, critics judged the Underground comix as "bad," offensive and perverse in a condemnation which, despite its superficialty, was heeded by many.[13] By the mid-1970s, much of the force of the comix had disappeared just as the energy of the counterculture as a whole had dissipated. However, the practice of focussing on the capacity of comics to exert different kinds of influence over its readers persisted.

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[12] Joseph Witek, "The Underground Roots of Fact-Based Comics," in *idem* (1989): 48-57, p. 54. For more information on the Underground Comix, refer to Mark Estren, *A History of Underground Comix* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1974); the second chapter of Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1990); and the last chapter of Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971). So far, Estren's book is the most comprehensive record of the comix; documentation of this movement is difficult because (a) the underground comix were too idiosyncratic in approach and too multifarious in subject matter to be easily summarised, (b) it must cover a wide expanse of the counterculture scene which spanned California to New York, and (c) there is a general reluctance among the artists to cooperate with researchers and critics.

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[13] Refer to the Mark Estren, *op cit.*, where he cites and counters numerous examples of objections to the undergound comix. For other reactions to the censorship of underground comix, see also, D. Donahue and Susan Goodrick, eds., *The Apex Treasury of Underground Comix* (New York: Quick Fox, 1974); and S. L. Huck, "Sex Comix: A Report for Adults Only," *American Opinion* 17 (1970): 15-20.

That ideas, attitudes, preferences and beliefs may be imparted through comics is not here in dispute. Indeed, it would be highly unreasonable to think that modern sensibility was not affected by comics at all. What is regrettable about the traditional critique of comics is that its fixed and enduring focus on morality has been maintained to the detriment of studies of other areas. More importantly, the various negative claims that have been made about the influence of comics were supported by insufficient data, and/or characterised by debatable methodology, in a way unimaginable for scholarship in other more established fields.[14] It would not occur to a serious critic to judge a novel on the evidence of a few paragraphs, nor a play on the basis of one or two scenes. Yet this practice is widely accepted in the criticism of comics. Such nonchalance and disapproval has also characterized works done on mass media and popular culture, most probably due to the stigma of "trivialization" that had been conferred on them from the start.[15] Relatedly, since many studies on comics were included as part of works on mass media and mass or popular culture, it is not surprising that comics were embroiled in the struggles of these two disciplines to break out from the tangle of contentious claims about merit, validity, scope, terms, subject matter and so on. Scholarship in all these areas could not advance without a major shift in perspective from the frustratingly narrow and repetitive concerns about the apocalyptic views of seductive mass media and inferior popular culture. The general mistrust of, and even disdain for, mass media and popular culture had to be shed and seriously re-evaluated before alternative ways to conceptualize their role in society could be found and the media rescued from their role as the villainous force liable for modern day social and cultural deterioration.

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[14] See, for example, Valerie Walkerdine, "Some day my Prince will come: young girls and the preparation for adolescent sexuality," in Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava, eds., *Gender and Generation* (London: Macmillan, 1984): 162-84; Clare Dellino, "Comics that set a bad example," *Sunday Times* (February 15, 1971): 19; Ruth Strang, "Why Children Read Comics," *Elementary School Journal* (1943): 336-342. For more examples and sustained analysis of poor approaches and methodology in comics criticism, refer to the two books by Martin Barker in the Bibliography section of this thesis.

[15] Joli Jensen, *Redeeming Modernity: Contradictions in Media Criticism* (London: Sage Publications, 1990) especially Chapters Two and Three.

The challenge and need to re-examine traditional thinking in popular culture studies and media discourse was sufficiently confronted in the 1980s, especially in the latter half of the decade. Critics have progressed beyond the primarily academic interest in the media culture of the 1920s when intellectuals began debating the effects of the new electric forms of entertainment on popular sensibility and on popular aesthetics. Most present endeavours propose to expose the tenacity and inadequacies of the old conceptual moulds and move beyond the incessant blaming of the media as an influence that deflects or deforms social progress into discussions of the fundamental assumptions upon which such blame is based. Similarly, there is an active reassessment of the basis for the derision of popular culture in order to reveal the relativity or arbitrariness of the standards on which such earlier conclusions were grounded. The new studies re-evaluate the terms, categories, presuppositions and methodologies with which mass media have customarily been thought, and more importantly, scrutinize the origins of the factors that have contributed to the existence of the prevailing opinion about media-in-society, calling attention to the cultural hierarchies that attend the social construction of subjectivity and of standards.[16] Unlike previous approaches which mostly aimed to prove that media has the power to influence, or illustrate the effects of that influence, the more recent ones investigate the explicit and implicit logic and processes operating in these claims of media influence: What are the reasons behind the analyses? From which perspective are they being conducted? Who is doing the studies and for whom are they meant? What ideologies are being espoused or criticized in the analyses? The new critics demand that the current media discourse not stop at simply asking if media influence does take place and what the effects are; it must clarify HOW the processes are supposed to take place, explain how ideas, images, attitudes, forms and contents of a specific medium can exist within the texts and reproduce themselves in the readers.

This broader and more penetrating approach to communication and media studies, while having been very constructively applied in studying cinema, television, and the genres of melodrama, romance and detective fiction, is not yet as prevalent in studies of comics. An exception and an excellent example of the new breed of comics critic is Martin Barker who, through his discussion of comics, systematically re-examines claims about media influence and re-assesses many poor theories or empirical misrepresentations concerning the power of mass media in general, and comics in particular. In *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics,* Barker shows how, in the brief history of comics as a mass medium, critics have made all kinds of ideological claims about what comics supposedly exemplify.[17] He uses comics as a case-study to reveal the ways critics have investigated the mass media for possible "influences," while calling attention to the fact that there are literally thousands of works on how comics affect children without the authors acknowledging that they are coming from a particular ideological perspective. He also demonstrates how many standard concepts used in critiquing the media, such as "identification" and "stereotypes" for example, are not so much analytical tools as arguments from definable social positions.

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[16] For examples of the new approaches to media discourse, refer to the works of John Fiske, James Carey, Tony Bennett, Stuart Hall, Ervin Goffman, M. Gurevitch, J. Curran and J. Woollacott, among others, in the Selected Bibliography section of this study.

Since the 1980s, historical studies, biographies, anthologies, encyclopedias, critical appreciation, and periodicals on the subject of comic art and artists have begun to proliferate in the US. Although still mostly focussing on how comics reflect or relate to the society and culture out of which they have grown, this time they are without the apologetic or defensive preamble or tone which earlier serious studies of comics carried. The rise of semiotic studies and an accompanying interest in the relations of verbal and visual languages has spawned several academic analyses of comic books, while increased general interest in individual comic-book artists has focused attention on some of the long-time masters of the form. Moreover, there is now an awareness of comics not only as a created product and social activity but as an artistic product which must be looked at in its own aesthetic terms. Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* is an important critical contribution by one of the central figures of the comicbook industry.[18] Eisner views comics as a distinct artistic expression with a literary-visual form. Using his own illustrations, he discusses his ideas on the potency of the medium for graphic storytelling and proceeds to discuss comics as a form of reading. Another fresh analysis of comics is Thomas Inge's *Comics as Culture* which shows the growth and development of comics as an important document of the twentieth century, and a distinct part of America's national heritage. In addition to demonstrating how comics have enriched and reflected the trends in American popular culture, Inge traces the influence of many American cartoonists in the world art scene and the relation of comics with other art and cultural forms.[19] Joseph Witek's *Comics as History* examines comic books for adults as narratives and provides a close reading of three examples utilizing the methods of contemporary semiotics' reading of images and other nonverbal structures as texts.[20] Included in his study is the comicbook responsible in large part for the recent increased interest in comics in the United States.

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[17] Martin Barker, *Comics: The Critics, Ideology, and Power* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

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[18] Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac, Fla.: Poorhouse Press, 1985).

[19] Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* (Mississipi: University Press of Mississippi, 1990). Inge is an important authority in the medium and played a vital role in the academic community's awakening to the art form.

Published in 1986, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, showing his parent's experiences related to their internment in the concentration camps in Auschwitz, caused a stir when it was nominated by the National Book Critics Circle for the biography category in 1987 and later won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.[21] Spiegelman's innovative exploration with comicbook form and content is not isolated. There have been other successful attempts in comics form which break away from common comicbook formulas to maximize the rich formal and thematic heritage of the medium; much of these took place in Europe, primarily in France, Belgium, Italy and Germany, where a tradition of well-written and skillfully illustrated comic books designed specifically for adults has existed since the late 1960s. In the United States, where comicbooks are mostly devised for teen-age diversion or considered throwaway entertainment, there have been notable changes in the comics scene in the last decade as evidenced by the creations of Will Eisner, Harvey Pekar, Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Jules Feiffer, the Hernandez brothers, Scott McCloud, Gary Trudeau, and M. Waterson, among others.

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[20] Witek, *op cit.*

[21] Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

Artists, readers and critics are developing an increasing confidence towards the capacity of comic books as a legitimate artistic form for expressing a wide range of ideas and emotions. As Witek observes:

> "the comic book, a widely accessible and commercially available medium, is now being chosen as a form by serious writers whose themes have traditionally been expressed in the forms of verbal narratives, or in films and other visual narratives . . . such that a general reading public now exists in the United States for narratives written in a medium historically considered solely the domain of subliterate adolescent fantasies and of the crassest commercial exploitation of rote generic formulas. Comic art is thus a literary medium in transition from mass popularity and cultural disdain to a new respectability as a means of expression and communication, and this new respect is evident first in the attitudes of the creators themselves."[22]

The popular success of comics as a mass medium has long obscured their pre-existence as an expressive form. Paying attention to the horde but ignoring individual examples, critics have seized upon comics as a sociological subject for clinical study, denying however from the onset that aesthetic qualities could be attributed to this medium. That comics can function as an artistic expression is proved by the presence of recently published comics for adults which dynamically deal with larger aesthetic and psychological issues earlier unthinkable in the medium, as well as by a shift of critical attitude towards them to recognize that comics is a legitimate contribution to the visual and narrative arts of the world. To date the most comprehensive book dealing with comics as an artistic medium is Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics:*

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[22] Witek, *op cit*, 37.

The Invisible Art which is a 215-page critical appraisal of the art in a comicbook form, using the medium of comics itself as a very innovative and effective way to study the art.[23] Also, the most comprehensive account of comicbooks for adults, is *Adult Comics: An Introduction* by Roger Sabin which comprehensively chronicles the rise and development of these comicbooks in Great Britain and the United States.[24]

The emergence of comicbooks as a respectable literary form in the 1980s might seem unlooked for given the long decades of cultural scorn and active social repression but the potential has always existed for comics to present the same kinds of narratives as other verbal and pictorial media. While serious literature in comic book form is a relatively recent and slightly unsettling concept in American culture, in Europe comics have long made broad inroads into highbrow culture, especially in France and Belgium where comics for adults have been published steadily and have attracted a group of readers which tend to be university graduates. In France, comics have been reviewed in the literary pages of *Le Monde* alongside articles on semiotics and biographies of prominent cultural figures. Without having to go Underground, French comics took on a highly critical sociological and political character in the 1960s and 1970s. University degrees on this topic may be had in France,

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[23] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Princeton, Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993).

[24] Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

Germany, Belgium and Italy. In fact, at the Sorbonne, comics as a distinct discipline was institutionally introduced by the Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie as early as 1972 and a special subject "l'Histoire et l'Esthetique de la bande dessinée" has been taught by one of the leading figures in comics analysis, Francis Lacassin. Together with Jules Renard, Lacassin helped found the "Club des Bandes dessinées" in 1962 in Paris, which later became the "Centre d'Etude des Littératures d'Expression Graphique," a Center which has consistently been crucial to the development and growth of comics scholarship. He also published *Pour un neuvième Art*, to date the most comprehensive description and analysis of the formal and structural aspects of comics.[25] Most of the early critical attention to comics has been provided by French, German and Italian scholars, who have even produced many of the most comprehensive studies of American comic strips and books.[26] Another difference in the attitude towards comics between Europe and the US is apparent in the perception of comics artists. The talents of Winsor McCay of "Little Nemo in Slumberland" and Harry Herriman of "Krazy Kat," both American artists, were more fully appreciated in Europe before the US. At present, several comics artists in Europe are publicly acclaimed not only for their comicbooks, but for their achievements in other cultural forms as well. The French-Yugoslav star Enki Bilal and the Chilean

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[25] Francis Lacassin, *Pour un neuvième art* (Paris: Slatkine Editions, 1982).

[26] European sources, mostly unavailable in English, have been included in the Bibliography section.

Alejandro Jodorowski, for example, have recently made films, and Gérard Lauzier's plays have opened successfully in Paris. Other crossover artists include British novelist Doris Lessing, who is presently scripting a comic book, and Javier Mariscal, who is one of Spain's most famous designers, creating furniture as well as the 1992 Olympic mascot, Cobi.[27] Art Spiegelman notes the discrepancy: "In France, a cartoonist is one step below a movie director. In America, (a cartoonist) has only slightly more status than a plumber."[28]

Cultural attitudes towards the comics are changing in the US. Comicbooks for adults, with intentional literary and artistic aspirations, are still relatively rare in the US but prevalent enough to initiate new interests, including re-considerations of the traditional, more commercial comicbooks. This is apparent from Hollywood's recent more elaborate and insightful production of films based on comic books to the substantial increase of studies about comicbooks, especially in the fields of semiotics and psychoanalysis. One can finally see the development of a body of works attempting to assess comics on their own terms, measuring their worth against their own developed standards and aesthetic principles rather than by the yardsticks of other related art.[29] This is the most difficult area to write about due to present inadequacies in the critical vocabulary as definitions of the structural and stylistic principles behind successful comic art have yet to be formulated. Thus, there is still the tendency to rely on terms borrowed from other areas of creative expression. Apart from the necessity of formulating evaluative terms, there is as well the need to clarify terms without turning them into constraints.

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[27] Margot Hornblower, "Beyond Mickey Mouse: Comics Grow Up and Go Global," *Time* (1 November 1993): 63-654.

[28] *Ibid*, 64.

[29] Refer to the works of Arthur Berger (1991); A. Dorfman (1983); S. McCloud (1993); D. Chavez (1988); N. Harris (9185); B. DeMott (1984); Pearson and Uricchio (1993); R. Sabin (1993), among others, in the Bibliography section of this study.

An index of these endeavours is the appearance and recognition of a new term for comics: "sequential art" as initiated by Will Eisner. Sequential art has the advantage of avoiding the generic connotations of the word "comic" while sidestepping associations with the burlesque, the ridiculous and humorous which have burdened initial impressions of the medium. This problem does not exist in the "Bilderstreifen" of Germany, "bande dessinée" of France and "fumetti" of Italy, terms which not only have no immediate connections to the "comic" but in fact call attention to intrinsic qualities of the comics as a narrative medium. The desire to clearly define what comics are and to detach them from notions of the comical and humorous is one of the critical concerns of those involved in the re-assessment of comics. Stan Lee, renowned for the creation of Spider-Man and his other achievements at the Marvel Group of comics, makes the following statement providing the terminological rationale to be followed in the present study:

> "Consider the word "comicbook." I've been fighting a losing battle with the rest of the world over that word for years. Most everybody spells it "comic book" as if it's two separate words. As is, "comic" is an adjective which modifies the word "book," thus making it

> mean a comical book. Such an interpretation would certainly give a casual reader the wrong impression. . . Now, let's consider the single word "comicbook." Ah, what a world of difference! Suddenly, it is no longer an appellation indicative of humorous reading matter, but rather a generic term denoting a specific type of publication."[30]

In an interview for *Time Magazine*, Art Spiegelman also has this to say: "But I spell it *c-o-m-i-x*, so you are not confused by the fact that comics have to be funny, as in comic. You think it is a co-mix of words and pictures."[31] Perhaps the most revealing definition is Martin Barker's assertion that: "a comic is what has been produced under the definition of a 'comic'. One cannot answer the question "What is a comic?" by formal qualities alone; a comic is what has been produced under that *controlling definition*."[32] This fact must be acknowledged considering the historical process whereby public arguments about comics and what is acceptable under that name, especially the incessant efforts to censor and control what may or may not be produced under that name, have become in their turn powerful determinants of the products. In these instances, the definition of comics had become a constraining force, requiring publishers and artists to abide by it and, in turn, sustain the limiting public concept of what comics are and can be.

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[30] Stan Lee, "Introduction," in Les Daniels, ed. *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics* (London: Virgin, 1991): iii.

[31] *Time* (November 1, 1993): 68.

[32] Barker, *op cit*, 8. Italics mine.

What underlies the efforts to re-define comics seems to be the need to clarify its status as an object of study. It must be detached from the notions of the comical and humorous so that it can gain adequate respectability and merit "serious" attention and appraisal. It must be retrieved from the constraints of censorship and allowed the artistic freedom enjoyed by other cultural forms. Comics artists and critics both aim to shake loose the taint of "trivia" that comes with comics. What is interesting is how the efforts to change the terms and definitions of comics as a subject of study may affect its condition as a commodity. "Comics for Adults" seems to signify simply a label for censorship rather than a category of a distinct narrative medium. Can "comix" be perceived without its history of being a rebellious form of expression by the exclusive Underground, and how would the connotations dictate the nature of its audience? Critics may prefer to use the terms sequential art or graphic novel, but for the public, especially the majority of present comics readers, it is doubtful if these terms can replace "comics." Publishers would indubitably produce and market their products under the name most commercially viable for the targetted consumers, eventually causing a disparity between the comicbooks with literary aspirations and the ones intended for more commercial distribution. What features from which examples shall then be the basis for measuring *successful* comic art?

The problems confronting the re-assessment of comics reflect the dilemmas which attend the study of other forms of popular culture: the attempts to smoothe the friction between refined aesthetics and mass popularity, and the struggle to legitimize its status through critical academic approval--in short, preoccupations with acceptance and hierarchies which have long plagued the field. Views and attitudes towards the studies of mass culture and popular art forms have, however, altered immensely in the last two decades and these changes have been beneficial for the scrutiny of mass media and communication studies as well. Much of the improved understanding and appreciation of popular forms may be attributed to the shifts in ideological inclinations used in analysing modern culture and society. Sanctioning and categorizing are actions that have ideological implications, and paradigms and criteria that were earlier presumed sacrosanct are now being shown to be artificial, relative and subjective. Much of the exposure and re-evaluation of implied ideology in the analysis of popular culture is being undertaken within the framework of cultural studies and it is in this field that the current breakthrough of comics into mainstream scholarship must be contextualized.

Chapter Two

On the Language of Comics and the Reading Process

> How can we recognize or deal with the new? Any equipment we bring to the task will have been designed to engage with the old: it will look for and identify extensions and developments of what we already know. To some degree, the unprecedented will always be unthinkable.
>
> But the question of what "texts" are or may be has also become more and more complex, has forced us to revise our sense of the sort of material to which the process of "reading" may apply.
>
> Terence Hawks
> "General Introduction to
> New Accent Books"

Introduction

The study of comics has, among its objectives, a goal similar to that set before the student of art and literature in general: to promote a form of understanding of the medium which sharpens perception and awareness, leading ultimately to a keener enjoyment of the form. Chapter One dealt with some of the major factors which have impeded the study of comics. Central among these impediments is the lack of seriousness in the general attitude towards the medium as an art form, as reflected in the Academy's long-standing dismissal of the study of comics. This situation may be summed up using the words of Maurice Horn: "(Comics is) an original form whose intrinsic values must be objectively assessed. A thorough knowledge of the field must be obtained, with the same assiduity as is required of any other discipline; the **a priori** judgement that this is an inferior form only deserving of inferior scholarship is an especially galling piece of tortuous reasoning."[1] Although comics scholarship in the last decade has exhibited a determination to overcome the medium's previous denigration, this determination remains subject to minor inhibiting factors: the tendency to study individual comic artists' styles and illustrations using the criteria of graphic art and the tendency to consider comics simply as part of the literary enterprise or as a static variety of film. While the comparisons implicit in these forms of analysis are valid and useful, they do not treat their subject as an art form in itself and therefore do not impart the notion that comics is a unique art form, with values and principles peculiar to it.[2] The concept of comics as a distinct art form must be an accepted premise in the analysis of comics as an art. In the absence of this principle, and without being accorded the status of an independent art form, comics will suffer as a poor relation of other literary or visual forms.

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[1] M. Horn, *Seventy-Five Years of the Comics* (Boston: Boston Book and Art, 1971): ix.

[2] Again, the state of scholarship in the United States and Europe must be distinguished. Ventures into the analysis of comics as an art form (comics are regarded as "the Ninth Art" in Europe) were already apparent in Europe, especially France and Belgium, as early as the first part of the 1970s.

A cursory look at American comicbooks would seem to belie the claim that assiduous scholarship in comics is warranted since American comicbooks and comic strips have often been unsophisticated in their subject matter. Closer scrutiny, however, would reveal an ingenious form, with a highly developed grammar and vocabulary based on a unique combination of verbal and visual elements. Comicbooks and strips have used words and pictures in a way more completely integrated than illustrated or picture books. In comics, images and words combine into a flexible, powerful literary form capable of a wide range of stylistic and narrative effects. As literary criticism now seeks to contain within its purview an attempt to develop a visual poetics, the unravelling of the relations between word and image in the complex semiotic process embodied in the comics page of a newspaper or comicbook would be a very fruitful exercise.

Text-Image Conflict in Comics

Very broadly defined, comics are composed of a series of drawings which tell a story and provide amusement for the reader. In their utilization of both pictures and words, comics are often regarded as descendants of works like the Egyptian reliefs, the Bayeux tapestry and emblems of the Baroque period which share with comics similar techniques of representation. The simultaneous presence of these two mediums neither started with comics nor is unique to them, yet the existence of both images and texts remain a contentious issue in studying comics. The study of comics is caught between evaluation of the constituent pictures and text with resulting fundamental problems in apportioning the value of these two constitutive elements. There are factors which seem to favor the valorization of images over texts in comics. In studies about the origin and development of the medium, for example, a graphic history is always provided. As a result, an "iconic archeology," rather than a textual one, is instinctively assigned to comics:

> La bande dessinée est donc une histoire en images dont la généalogie est iconographique; implicitement on choisit ainsi de définir la bande dessinée comme un système de figuration plus ou moins narratif qui aurait un rapport contingent avec le texte. Par ailleurs, ses historiens reconnaissant l'ancêtre de la bande dessinée comme un espace figuratif qui contient une inscription.[3]

It is not difficult to focus primarily on the images in comics since graphic art is always more striking than printed letters. Any comicbook is first perceived visually; readers are usually first struck by illustrations in the purchase of one comicbook over another. Studies have shown that people, especially children, are initially attracted to illustrations more than to words.[4] Indeed, in some comics, words are even unnecessary--strips like *Henry* by Carl Anderson have shown that comics are possible without words. However, words alone without pictures can *never* be considered comics. In other instances, meanwhile, words become secondary to images. Experimental innovations and stylistic advancements by many artists usurp the significance of the corresponding texts while some panels or whole pages of comicbooks are intentionally rendered without any text (see Appendices 1, 2 and 3). It is not surprising then that comics are often discussed on the basis of their graphic aspects alone. Accordingly, the linkage via caricature or similarity to other styles of illustrations is established, the presence of stylistic elements of fine art in the "art" of comics is examined, or in-depth analyses of the styles and techniques of compositional design, form and texture of individual artists who are acknowledged as masters in this realm are provided. Each of the above is a means by which the graphic qualities of comics are evaluated. Individual panels of Milton Caniff's comic strips, for example, have been displayed in museums. This presumes that Caniff's art may be appreciated out of the context of the comics medium, since the illustrations were isolated from the context of the narrative they were initially intended for. The subsequent reviews of Milton Caniff's exhibition attest to the possibility of exclusively paying attention to comics illustration divorced from the textual cues and the context of the comic strip or comicbook stories. Finally, the appropriation of comics in Pop art by, among others, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy

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[3] I. Pennachioni, *La nostalgie en images* (Paris: Libraires des Meridiens, 1982): 22.

[4] Rolf T. Wigand, "Toward a More Visual Culture Through Comics," in Alphons Silberman and H.-D. Dyroff, *Comics and Visual Culture* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1986): 28-61; H. Culbertson, "Words vs.Pictures: Perceived Impact and Connotative Meaning," *Journalism Quarterly* 51.2 (1974):226-237.

Warhol, has caused comics to be re-submitted to pictorial, artistic criteria and to be perceived as viable museum pieces. Thus, while studies of comics abound which deny importance to the texts, very seldom are there inquiries that only consider the stories without reference to the illustrations. Indeed, it seems that images are more essential to comics than texts.

One must be cautious, however, in making generalizations about the importance of either the graphic or textual renditions of comics, if only because of the diverse styles and predilections of the artists. Most importantly, one must not lose sight of the fact that both picture and text are the fundamental basis of almost all comics, and to seek to understand one without the other is to misinterpret the substance of this hybrid genre. In analysing comics, it is necessary to develop a new kind of understanding that goes far beyond the comprehension of the individual verbal and visual structures used. The reading of comics involves the pictures and their meanings in addition to the language, and the key to understanding them does not lie in the words or pictures themselves but in the interaction and relationships between them.

The crucial point is how effectively the linguistic and pictorial signs interact--how perfectly, how absorbingly and dynamically a story is related in pictures and texts. The interaction is all-important. The full significance of a story in comics is only possible through the interplay of all the signifying elements, and the communication of a joke or story is usually the effect of neither the linguistic nor the pictorial field solely, but of the hybrid. The nature and the degree of this word-picture interaction varies from work to work, but is a factor not to be overlooked in understanding a comic strip, as well as in analysing the potentials inherent in comics as an art form. The relation between text and image is a defining characteristic of comics, and the efficacy of the genre rests on the interdependence of the two mediums. As such, comics cannot help but demand of its readers the ability to decipher and "read" a new language--a *récit dessinée* or an iconographic narrative--comprised of both written and drawn codes. In reading comics and appreciating its formal composition, both words and illustrations form the "language" of comics, and this language must be accepted as comprising two different signifying units. Only by understanding this can one really appreciate comics to the fullest.

Definitions

A clear definition of comics is indispensable to the establishment of a system for analysing the language and conventions specific to this genre. If critical examination of the comics is to rest on a theoretical foundation of any substance, then that foundation must consist of a precise knowledge of what comics uniquely are--any aesthetic theory of an art should fit *that* art. To articulate an aesthetic theory of comics, we need a vocabulary tailored *for* comics and derived *from* the most distinctive aspects of that art form. Until there is agreement on what this art form is, difficulty in specifying and evaluating its distinctive aspects will continue to plague discussions. Considering the bewildering assortment of artistic and graphic styles, stories, characters and seeming purposes present in comics, a clear generic definition seems all the more compelling as a means of sifting through the wide variety of comicbooks and comic strips to ascertain those features that may be deemed common and integral to the art form. Most importantly, the word "comics" has had negative connotations in the past while attempts to counteract this negative image have been hampered by low esteem, often generated from within the industry itself. Establishing a definition is essential to overcome that negativity. As will be shown, the search for a definition of comics is also a process by which many misconceptions and limitations of the medium may be dispelled in order to advance and revitalize it. Varied definitions of comics are presented below not only to expand the popular connotation of the term "comics" as simple, illustrated reading materials for children, but also to indicate the difficulties involved in the textual analyses of comics. Since the more comprehensive studies of comics on its own terms have been undertaken by Europeans, most of the definitions that follow are from European sources.[5]

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[5] There was still a dearth in the comprehensive study of comics as an art form in the United States until the publication of Will Eisner, *Sequential Art* (Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1986) and Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* (Princeton, Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993). There are other notable attempts by Robert Harvey, L. Mintz and Lawrence Abbott, but all three are only article-length studies. As stated in the previous chapter, most critical studies dwell on overviews and histories, and more specific topics like comicbook superheroes and individual artists/cartoonists.

In *Pour un neuvième art*, Lacassin expands the brief and imprecise definition of comics provided in *Petit Larousse illustré* (1979) as "histoire racontée en dessins" to:

> Feuilleton en images assorties de textes exprimés par des dialogues et contenus en des ballons ou bulles; images alignées en rangées horizontales, reliées par un enchaînement logique, obéissant à une syntaxe traduite par un montage et des variations de cadrages et dont l'ensemble exprime une action dramatique.[6]

In *Lire la bande dessinée*, Pierre Masson acknowledges the various studies on the history and evolution of the comics, but asserts that comics should be considered as an art with its own domain, where the dynamic tension between image and text is central to its existence and creativity. Thus, he defines comics as:

> La bande dessinée se définit d'emblée comme un art exigeant; refusant le cloisonnement traditionnel des divers modes de création, elle s'efforce d'établir entre eux cette correspondance dont ont réve bien des poètes: l'écriture et les dessin fusionnant au point d'échanger parfois leur valeur, et organisant ainsi un espace magique ou s'affirmerait l'illusion du son et du mouvement.[7]

Meanwhile, mainly interested in the communicative process involved in reading comics, Ruben Gubern provides a systematic study of the genre in the light of contemporary linguistics. He begins with this definition in *El lenguaje de los comics*:

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[6] Francis Lacassin, *Pour un neuvième art: la bande dessinée* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1982): 251-2.

[7] Pierre Masson, *Lire la bande dessinée* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires du Lyon, 1985): 6.

> . . . (una) estructura narrativa formada por la secuencia progressiva de pictogramas, en los cuales pueden integrarse los elementos des escritura fonetica.[8]

Finally, Fresnault-Deruelle's title, *Récit et discours par la bande: essais sur les comics*, signals his intentions and the focus of his study. He perceives comics mainly as:

> . . . forme moderne de narration figurative, la bande dessinée se caractérise par l'association des images fixes en sequences integrées (tant sur le plan graphique que sur le plan diégétique), dotées ou non de textes inserée (presentées ou non sous forme de ballons).[9]

These definitions, with their different focuses and different levels of specificity, accurately indicate the multi-facetedness of comics as an art. More importantly, they allude to that unique feature of comics which are considered to be both essential and troublesome: the independent yet inter-related presence of both graphic and literary signs. Indeed, the language of comics resists the characterization of a univocal sign. It joins two distinct mediums--written inscription (text) plus graphic registration (images)--to constitute itself as a text-spectacle. The intelligibility of its textual functioning is dependent on the recognition of this weave of image and text. Thus, textual reading is rendered difficult by the co-presence of two distinct codes to concretize *one* sign, and this difficulty is further confounded by the lack of interpreting grammar with which critically to analyze this "language." As Masson further states:

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[8] Ruben Gubern, *El lenguaje de los comics* (Barcelona: Ediciones Peninsula, 1972): 107.

[9] Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, *Récits et discours par la bande dessinée* (Paris: Hachette, 1977): 16-17.

> Or, cette dualité de la bande dessinée, qui devrait faire sa grandeur, fait aussi sa faiblesse; malgre les présentations plus savantes qui en ont été faites depuis, elle continue de permettre à une majorité d'esprits de considérer le "neuvième art" comme un genre hybride, donc forcement mineur et qui ne peut espérer à s'imposer qu'en dépouillant cette double nature.[10]

It is difficult to dissociate image and text in comics, and it is unnecessary to valorize one over the other. What is essential, instead, is to understand *why* the relation of the two mediums is important and *how* it operates specifically in comics.

Before attempting to answer these questions, however, a short digression into some definitions provided in English is in order. In addition to the English term's typical association with mirth and frivolity, the usual definition of "comics" also limits the stylistic of the medium by constant connection with cartooning and caricature. The usual dictionary meaning of comicbooks, for example, is: a magazine consisting of narrative cartoon drawings.[11] This is a definition and general perception that has the drawback of limiting the style that may be employed in comic art. Comic strips, meanwhile, are defined as "a narrative series of cartoons, usually arranged horizontally in a newspaper, magazine or book" or "a form of cartooning in which a cast of characters enacts a story in a sequence of closely related drawings designed to educate and/or entertain readers."[12] Cartooning should not be included in defining comics, for as Scott McCloud appropriately asserts, "nothing in its definition should limit style or determine subject matter or range of topics to be covered," otherwise, the common unfortunate practice of mistaking the *style and format* of the most popular comicbooks for the essence of the medium itself shall continue.[13]

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[10] Masson, *op cit.*, 7.

[11] Patrick Hanks, ed. *Collins. Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Harper and Collins, 1978).

There is another aspect of comics that is usually taken for granted, and which serves to undermine its role as an indispensable feature of the medium: comicbooks and comic strips always consist of "story situations"--descriptions and accounts of people and ideas with a logical, sequential progression in which "reading" plays an important role and differentiates comics from pure visual art where the perception is instantaneous rather than sequential. This aspect is highlighted in the new terms that are increasingly employed in recent discussions of comics, concurrent with the seemingly new status of the medium: *graphic novel* or *sequential art* replace or are alternatively used for comicbooks to avoid the English terminology problems cited above.[14] Sequential art, as first coined by Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art*, has further been expanded by Scott McCloud to provide a definition for comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," a definition noticeably neutral in terms of limiting the medium to particular styles of illustration or schools of art, as well as the range of storytelling themes, technique and procedures in printing and publishing, and materials or tools to be used (see Appendix 4).[15]

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Princeton, Winsconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993): 17.

[14] A note of caution must be made regarding the term "graphic novel." Graphic novels existed long before the term itself was coined and became popular around 1986-7. The term is now used mostly to refer to a particular type of adult-oriented comicbooks published in expensive album-format and sold not only in comics stores but regular bookstores as well. Comics scholar Roger Sabin, in *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 236-50, states that "a graphic novel is a comic in book form, but not all comics in book form are graphic novels" and aspects to be considered in determining which comicbooks may be regarded as graphic novels include, among others, thematic unity and perception of a finite story (in cases of

At this point in comics research, argumentation in search of clearer definitions is not merely a ruse to expand the discussion but is genuinely inevitable and necessary since the concept of comics has traditionally been too narrow and limiting for the medium. A proper definition, if found, would give lie to stereotypes and show that the potential of comics is limitless and exciting (see Appendix 5). Thus, following McCloud's definition, some works of, among others, Maurice Sendak, Raymond Briggs, Edward Gorey and Shel Silverstein, branded and marketed as illustrated "books" could actually be classified as comics if it were not for the old notion of comicbooks as cheap, softcover magazines of serialized cartoons.[16]

In this study, the terms "comicbooks" and "sequential art" shall be used alternatively to convey a conviction in the importance of narrative in perceiving

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collections); length of narrative, number of pages, the pacing of the narrative, and so on.

[15] McCloud, *op cit.*, 22.

[16] In his discussion of graphic novels as a definable category of comics, Sabin (*op cit.*, 237) already includes Raymond Briggs in his list of prominent authors of the graphic novel, therefore placing him within the tradition of comics for adults.

and evaluating the expressive power of the art of comics, particularly of comicbooks. The following sections undertake to discern the conventions in comics largely based on narrative, contending that the primary function of the features of the medium, particularly that of the peculiar text-image interaction in comics, is to solicit narrative comprehension.

Comics and Narration

Narration, broadly defined, is the intent of comicbooks; their purpose is to tell a story. Because they aim at a large public, comicbooks have come to compete with or eventually displace such older forms of popular narratives as dime novels, pulp fiction, and magazine serials, among others. While sharing many themes, images, and even characters with these other popular forms of expression, comics deviate in their narrational activity by depending not only on words but on the intricate interaction of both the linguistic and graphic elements present in the medium. Comics is a narrative of words and pictures, both verbal and visual, in which neither words nor pictures are quite satisfactory without the other. Conversely, the relation between the two elements depends on the thrust of the narrative it operates in. It is in connection with the narrational process that one may fully appreciate and understand the interaction between verbal and iconic signs in comics.

Individually or collectively, image and text may affect the style, overall design and aesthetic effect of a comic sequence or strip, but their interaction principally serves to aid readers to construct the story (or joke) that the artist intended. It is in the activity of selecting, arranging and rendering story material--especially in the choice of what to illustrate and what to narrate--in order to achieve a narrative coherence perceptible to a receiver that the interaction of the two mediums is most vital to the artist, and particularly to the reader. Many cognitive activities are performed in making sense out of a narrative: a reader makes inferences which are open-ended, probabilistic and subject to corrections. Meanwhile, the reader often hypothesizes about the story's ending--weighing the probabilities of future narrative events and testing his or her expectations as more information is given and more events unfold. The interaction between graphic and linguistic elements in comics aids the reader in executing operations relevant to constructing a story out of a sequence's particular depiction. Ignoring one medium leads to a misinterpretation of the story or joke or worse, makes a sequence wholly incomprehensible. It is when images and texts are perceived together that they are more effective in realizing the narrative in comics. The opposition, confirmation, and other interaction between the pictures and words reveal unstated premises for making inferences, and make possible the humour, surprise, or other such appropriate endings of the story fascinating to the reader. Since all narratives, in order to sustain a reader's attention, are composed alternately to reward, modify, frustrate or defeat a reader's search for story coherence, the play between text and image becomes even more potent. It is this very play which provides the irony, complications, double meanings, humour, suspense, melodrama, pun, parody, secret motivations, and other similar intentions in the story (see Appendices 6 to 8).

With the manipulation of the interaction between the two codes which make up its language, comics have at their disposal the syntax of other literary and artistic forms: iteration, distortion, amplification, stylization, and so on. There is, however, an idiosyncracy in comics narrative due to publication or production requirements which differ from books or even films on which narrative analysis are often done. The flow of the story in comics, particularly in comic strips, is sometimes marred by artifical or strategic narrative breakdowns caused by publishing specifications (quite similar to earlier novels previously published in serialized forms) which reduce or cut up materials to intelligible daily, weekly or monthly installments. Many cartoonists manage to turn this requirement into an advantage; they try to enhance the suspense or humour naturally accruing from each daily installment by working deliberately toward each day's concluding panel, maintaining a running joke or ending in a partial gag, or creating in the last panel a springboard of suspense to carry the story to the next day.

The conventions of the art form are refined enough today that most contemporary books and strips can seldom be faulted for narrative breakdowns, while older strips sometimes offer examples of obviously flawed breakdowns. Even among the recent ones, in fact, there are still inept or awkward breakdowns which weaken the structure and projection of the joke or story. Although narrative breakdowns reduce all action to discrete static moments, comicbooks can, nonetheless, be evaluated by the extent to which a smooth sequential progression is achieved. This progression must be served by both the visual impact and the nuances of the story, and its assessment must embrace both the pictures and the texts used. Narrative breakdowns require allowances or different criteria for analysing narrative coherence and flow and, like other features distinct to comics, depend greatly on the successful interaction of images and text in advancing a narrative.

Comics analysis is best served with criticism that considers the ways in which graphics and words are interrelated and recognized as forming the vocabulary and grammar of the "language" of comics. The following sections will attempt to discuss the elements in comics that are utilised in the creation and the process of "reading" comics. These are: 1) panels, which include the concepts of gutter and closure; 2) the use of balloons and the art of lettering in comicbooks, and 3) the use of panels and text balloons in signalling the rhythm of the narrative, which also addresses timing and duration in comics.

Narration in Frames: The Uses of Panels or Vignettes

Rather than scrutinizing elements one at a time, narration in comics can be better analysed by focussing on the interplay of potentially equivalent narrational factors. The image-text conflict may be circumscribed, for example, by taking the panel or vignette as the unit of signification. In comics, images are drawn and accompanying texts are provided usually within an enclosing black line which often forms a rectangle. Since both image and text are contained within one panel or frame, taking this as a single unit attenuates the dispute regarding the advantage of language over image, and the assumption that an image is more universally expressive than language. Instead, image and text may be given equal interpretative weight as they need not be analysed separately or contrastively. The panel provides an enclosure, a unified field wherein images and text may be analysed in relation to one another, and subsequently, in relation to other images and/or texts within other panels or outside the frames. The panel, in fact, *graphically* and *diegetically* unifies image and text in the comics: it forms a graphic unit which represents one moment, one instant of an action in the narrative--it then interacts with other frames to create a sequence which constitutes the syntagmatic discourse of the story. The panel is the fundamental unit of comic art, the smallest unit of "comics grammar" in which the complex interaction of text and picture operates. It is a process of organizing sensory impressions into intelligible patterns wherein the panels' lines, sizes and shapes offer cues or criteria for the perception of impressions of meaning within the confines of the medium and as intended by the artist.

The use of panels has been credited as responsible for the narrative unity in comics:

> La unidad narrativa en el tebeo es el cuadro, tambien llamado viñeta. El cuadro acostumbra a tener forma rectangular y sus dimensiones son enormemente variables, segun la conveniencia del dibujante. Dentro del cuadro queda acotada, pues, una zona extension, variable en la que el artista distribuye su composicion. Los limites pueden estar representados por una simple linea--de espesor variable--hecha con tiralineas, o faltar.[17]

In agreement with Lara, Gubern goes even further and sees the **viñetas** as a graphic technique (**pictograma**) specific to the comics which confutes, or even invalidates, the text-image conflict and presents an effective synthesis of two distinct mediums, thereby optimizing expression.

In addition to its unifying function, Gubern sees the **viñetas** as responsible for signalling the relevant time and space dimensions in comics narrative:

> (viñetas son). . .los pictogramas utilizados especificamente en el lenguaje de los comics y en no otras formas de communicacion. . . . representacion pictografica del minimo espacio o/y tiempo significativo, que constituye la unidad de montaje de un comic.[18]

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[17] Antonio Lara, *El apasionante mundo del tebeo* (Madrid: Ed. Cuadernos para el Dialogo, Sociedad Anonima, 1972): 35.

[18] Ruben Gubern, *El lenguaje de los comics* (Barcelona: Ediciones Peninsula, 1972): 115.

In this regard, one may think of comics narratives as the process whereby a series of "framed" views interact to cue and channel the reader's construction of a meaningful story in comics. In addition to simply serving as visual margins, frames enable the writers to surmount problems in presenting complex narratives within the static, two-dimensional space of the comics world.

As a graphic art, the utilization and perception of space is of paramount importance in the comics. Instead of simple reliance on the clarity of textual clues, narration in comics depends considerably on the effective positioning of the viewer with respect to a production in/of space. Discourse becomes a series of views, having their source in the viewer's position (strategically controlled or manipulated by the illustrator). One of the artist's primary concerns is always: How is the space of the story to be presented and where is the spectator in relation to it? The ingenuity of the comics' artists lie in their manipulation of the contents and sequencing of panels in order most effectively to express their narratives.

The primary function of perspective should be to manipulate purposely the reader's orientation in accord with the author's narrative plan. Another use of perspective is its employment to manipulate and produce various emotional states in the reader. The reader's response may be influenced by his or her positioning as a spectator so that a scene depicted from above may evoke a sense of detachment--depicted from below, a feel of inferiority or fear. Depiction from a different level would elicit different levels of involvement or participation. Concurrent to the angle of presentation, the size and shape of the panel may also be used to elicit different levels of involvement or response from the readers, i.e., a narrow panel could trigger a sense of confinement, whereas a wide one inspires freedom or escape (see Appendices 9 and 10).

While possessing coherence and balance on its own, a panel is always only a part of a whole design which follows and exhibits patterns of narration, a rhythm of the unfolding events and a recognizable space and time dimension. Panels provide the frame for understanding the relationship between words and image and the cues for the story's sequential order, as well as many other narrative processes. Frames form units which define the spaces for the coherence and activity between pictorial and verbal cues; they also mark the rhythm and tempo of the narrative's unfolding, control the points of view and angles of presentation, signal to the reader which perspective is being given or made sympathetic, as well as signal the story's space and time dimensions. As Lacassin points out:

> La technique spécifique de la bande dessinée se caractérise par un découpage du récit visuel en plans exprimant une durée très courte et dont le montage obéit à un rhythme obtenu par manipulation du format et de l'image et de l'angle de vision. La structure du récit est fondée sur une imbrication harmonieuse du son (paroles, bruits) et de l'image, celui-la, figurant à l'interieur de celle-ci. La parole condensée en dialogues est contenu dans des

> ballons qui paraissent s'echapper de la boucher des personnages ou mème des objets.[19]

A montage best describes the nature of this "récit visuel": a montage resulting from the juxtaposition and inter-relation of signifying units which make up the syntagmatic dicourse of the comics. The panel or vignette constitutes the basic unit as well as marks the unity of the montage. Joined side by side, panels form a system of signs rendered coherent by the underlying principle of orienting the reading of the narrative. Each unit's signification is amplified and/or relativized according to its place and function in the organization of this system. Autonomous elements which may have little value by themselves find renewed signification when grouped together to be seen in opposition or in conjunction with one another.

The manipulation of the various aspects of the vignette provides almost unlimited means of maneuvering the plot and, consequently, gives rise to numerous narrational possibilities. Indeed, in-depth analyses of many comics reveal the sophistication with which comics artists play with recognizable narrative schemes, especially as the montage-like nature of the art lends considerable flexibility and potential to such play. This play is especially important to comics since formulaic narratives abound in the industry and the repetition of characters and the use of leitmotifs are rampant.

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[19] Lacassin, *op cit.*, 14.

The reciprocal influence between narration and the stylistic processess of the comics which operates in the use of frames may be further clarified by discussing composition and lay-out in comic art which entails more detailed attention to the arrangement of the visual elements within each panel of a strip or book. Comicbook composition and lay-out may be evaluated by looking at individual panels, panel by panel, at one full page or at the biggest panel available--a double page layout. An essential guiding feature to gauge the effectiveness of the composition is narrational clarity--choosing and arranging the elements of a panel, panel sequence, single page lay-out or double page spread so as to depict clearly their function in advancing the story. Controlling the focus of the reader is important; one way to effectively do this is to select a "camera" distance so that each panel frames only the minimum essentials of a scene while maximizing story-telling, and thereby corresponding to what Robert Harvey calls the "graphic center of focus:"

> Most composition in the graphic arts have what I call a "center of focus" -- a place to which the arrangement of the elements of the compostion forces our attention (not necessarily the geometric center of the composition). In the most effective comic panel composition, our attention should be focused on whatever element in that panel that contributes most to the telling of the story. That place in a panel I call "the graphic center of narrative focus"--*graphic center* emphasizing the visual nature of the medium, and *narrative focus* embracing the storytelling function of comic art.[20]

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[20] Robert Harvey, "The Aesthetics of Comic Strips," *Journal of Popular Culture* (Spring 1986): 650.

In comics, panel composition does not necessarily follow the "geometric center" of most graphic art because of such constraints as having to arrange speech balloons and their corresponding characters in reading order, the inclusion of captions, the need to change camera angle to vary perspective in a sequence, and an artist's preference or ability to draw close-up or wide angle scenes. The choices made by a sequential artist must be measured by comprehensibility for, as Eisner puts it: "The sequential artist 'sees' for the reader because it is inherent to visual narrative art that the requirement on the viewer is not so much analysis as recognition."[21] Nonetheless, although narrative consequence must rank highly in composing panel progression and lay-out, style and design must also be considered. The skillful rendition of a panel and a series of panels rests on the artists' understanding and appreciation of his of her reader's "visual literacy" (see Appendix 11). With each decision of what to include or exclude, an artist presumes knowledge of his or her readers' visual competence which is mostly based on experience and memory. The artist must supply sufficient cues in each panel so as to activate the remembrance necessary for comprehension, without providing too much so as to take the pleasure out of recognition and participative reading (see Appendices 12 and 13).

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[21] Eisner, *op cit.*, 38.

The composition of the story, the interaction of texts and images, as well as the angle of perspective or presentation chosen by the artist also signal the truth claims and ideological manipulation of the narrative. An individual panel conventionally depicts an emblematic moment in time from a representative point in space, a process of blocking off the visual perspective and time of action for each panel. One of the principal skills of comicbook narration lies in selecting from among the nearly infinite potential of choices the most effective points and moments to match the thematic movement of the story.

The perceived significance of the moment depicted in comics is the outcome of a narrative choice, among a potentially infinite number of choices, which will then set the tone of the narrative, present a privileged angle, or determine the truth claim in the story being related. Analysis and comparison of texts must take into account a complex set of prior narrative choices which establish the field and boundaries of each particular telling of events. Joseph Witek provides an analysis of two comic books depicting one historical event: The Battle at Fort Sumter. The two versions vary widely in point of view, in tone and in the ideological implications each draws from the events it is narrating. Witek points out how the title and the initial panels of each comicbook already direct the interpretation of an event: "First Shot" rendered by Harvey Kurtzman, Joe Severin and Will Elder starts with an exploding cannon ball which fills more than half of the first page, and the succeeding four panels show the trajectory of the shot and its subsequent explosion (see Appendix 14). The other version by Jack Kirby, meanwhile, opens with a more conventional rendering of battle showing soldiers and officers, drawn with a demeanour of rationality, sensibly discussing their next moves and possible surrender (see Appendix 15). Witek warns against hasty judgement of the precision of one over the other, however. Instead, a better focus is to investigate the varying ways in which these narratives deploy the conventions of sequential art to make truth claims about an event already weighted with cultural significance, previously established readings, and individual associations.[22]

A more common, though largely unnoticed priviledging of an ideological tone or truth claim is performed by presenting the narrative through the perspective of the lead character. In most popular American comicbooks, this is usually the ubiquituous crime-fighting superhero/ine (see Appendix 16). Specific narrative devices grant superheroes narrative centrality and, in addition, often cede to them narrative authority through point-of-view frames, first person narration and other textual and graphic cues which foster reader identification with them and their exploits. In the process, reader acceptance of the superhero's hegemonic role and function is encouraged, notwithstanding the fact that some superheroes resort to "illegal" means of solving crimes or upholding justice, and that the presence of superheroes attests to flaws and lacunas in society's legal and policing system.[23]

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[22] Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1989): 22ff.

A. Gutter and Closure

Close scrutiny of the uses and effects of panels in comic art shows that "text" in comics takes form according to an elaborate series of conventions. One important and distinct feature of comic art narration, for example, is the concept of the "gutter." As panels form borders to enclose material for narration, so do the same borders work to exclude the surrounding space. Much of the story in comics takes place in these intervals between the frames, in the gaps which separate the panels, called the gutter. From reading experience and sense-making that one naturally employs while "reading," readers fill in gaps in information and cues supplied in texts: in sequential art, for example, although nothing is provided either textually or graphically, experience tells us as readers that something must be there and so we make the leap ourselves from one panel to the other in the usual sense-making which always accompanies reading. We, as readers, provide the intervening actions, and do this no matter how long or large the interval is between one panel and the next. The type of leap to be made dictates the flow and pace of the narrative.

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[23] The hegemonic roles and functions of superheroes, and how these are implied or emphasized through various narrative devices in comic books, will be discussed in more detail in Chapters Four and Five of this study.

The rhythm or the narrative in turn depends upon the difficulty of the transitions the readers are asked, or rather, forced to make, as the amount of bridging material that must be supplied in moving from panel to panel to comprehend the story is set.

Scott McCloud has categorized these "leaps" into six different levels in a transition scale for narrative movement and comprehension in comics: 1) moment-to-moment, 2) action-to-action, 3) subject-to-subject, 4) scene-to-scene, 5) aspect-to-aspect, and 6) non-sequitur (see Appendix 17). He has also graphed the frequency of the transition techniques used by well-known comics artists internationally and showed that the breakdown proportion of transition types used is consistent among different genres of the medium, and very similar even among artists with very different styles, designs, and subject matter (see Appendix 18). McCloud proposes that the proportion is an important, albeit invisible, structural crutch used widely in comics in order to allow readers minimum signals to mentally construct a continuous, unified reality from a medium which depends on reading and understanding "empty spaces" (see Appendix 19).[24] In the example provided as Appendix 20, Jim Steranko relies on the readers to formulate a narrative and uses the convention of the gutter adroitly to circumvent the strict Comics Code in a series of wordless panels. Steranko manages to present a sequence rife with sexual innuendos, while leaving it to the readers to bridge the gap between the panels. Although there is no text to make the reader linger in any one panel, neither does this style rush the reader from panel to panel because of the rather atypical transitional leaps between panels.[25]

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[24] McCloud, *op cit.*, 70ff.

As part of further experimentations with panel and page formats, artists like Milton Caniff, Will Eisner, Jack Kirby and Neal Adams, among others, started "violating" the gutter space as early as the mid-1960s. Text and graphic art would sometimes extend into the gutter although the squares designating the panels are kept intact. Sometimes, the borders of the panels are eliminated altogether and images spill into the gutter without, however, totally obliterating the spaces which signal the transition between panels. In addition, various shapes other than the traditional squares or rectangles are used to mark the panels, therefore incorporating the gutter more graphically into the narrative and total page lay-out. The functions of this procedure are variable, but accentutating key moments in the narrative or rendering panoramic images are two of the most common (see Appendices 21 to 23).

B. Text Reads as Image: Lettering and Balloons

Similar to the use of panels, the use of balloons is a defining characteristic of the comics (see Appendix 24). Nowhere is the inter-relation of image and text in comics more apparent than in the imaginative use and continuous transformation of words and text into graphic status through the use of balloons.

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[25] Appendix 20: *Agent Nick Fury* by Jim Steranko (Les Daniels 1993: 88).

Balloons started as a rectangle delineating speech in a frame, usually employed to differentiate direct speech from narration. There are other substitutions possible, however, and not all artists use balloons, even for direct speech. A well-known example is Hal Foster in the *Prince Valiant* series, as well as in his rendition of Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan* (see Appendix 25). Narrative texts not placed in balloons are usually utilized to supplement images, as in providing additional information about critical persons or objects, or expounding on the intervening events in the interval between panels (see Appendix 26). In some serial publications, there are even special panels for narrative texts at the beginning and/or end of installments--summarizing previous actions or foreshadowing future ones--to ensure continuity. However, the majority of comicbooks, past and present, combine the use of narrative texts and balloons in presenting the story.

When introduced, the use of balloons made the third person and invisible narrator superfluous. The characters can speak more directly and a more conventional, less stilted style of dialogue could be used. Thought balloons also made introspection more direct and personal. In reducing or sometimes even totally omitting narrative text, the use of balloons is also effective in propelling the plot forward in terms of actual reading time. Through time, balloons have developed into a graphic component intrinsic to sequential art. Its development, which allowed for the integration of texts into images in one imaginative fashion after another, has marked the differences between other "illustrated texts" and the comics:

> (l)a différence entre l'histoire illustrée et la bande dessinée n'est pas seulement que la bande dessinée intègre le récit à l'image à travers la bulle, *mais qu'elle fait du message verbal un message également iconique*. L'écrit devient image, et meme une image à part entière. La typographie, la forme de la bulle, son emplacement et le volume qu'elle occupe dans la vignette sont autant de traits qui importent (emphasis mine)[26]

Eisner has called balloons a "desperation device" which "attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element: sound."[27] Corresponding to the increased sophistication in the medium and its artists, the balloon developed from a simple enclosure to take on additional meaning to become an important narrational device. It soon gained independence from a merely functional role to become aesthetically imbedded and part of the whole vignette as more and more artists experimented with and manipulated its appearance and content.

Now, balloons themselves constitute an essential element as part of a new pictographic code. The various forms and contours of the balloons enhance both texts and image in expressing emotions, movement, sound effects, abstract concepts, tone of dialogue and secret motivations or intentions (see Appendices 27 and 28). Noticeable too, is how artists have rendered the lettering, both within and outside a balloon, such that the letters function as an extension of the imagery. The choice and design of the typeface convert the normally mechanical aspect of type or font into a component of supportive involvement in the imagery which can provide the mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound. Text, rendered in concert with the art, shows how the "reading" of it can evoke and influence specific emotions and modify the perception of the image.

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[26] Pennacchioni, *op cit.*, 145.

[27] Eisner, *op cit.*, 26.

The ability of verbal signs to be transformed into graphic signs through the use of balloons is international, and works even in cultures with different figural tradition like Japan, China and Thailand. Indeed, it is possible that, to an extent, the Japanese and Chinese are predisposed to more visual forms of communication because of their calligraphy which evolved from ideograms and fused drawing and writing. Comics--**manga** or **komikkusu** in Japanese--make up 30 percent of Japan's total production in books and magazines, and over one billion Japanese comic magazines and books are sold annually.[28] Japanese comics are not mere western importations but belong to a century-old tradition of pictorial narration which can be traced back to the picture scrolls of the 19th century. Japanese comics contain highly developed symbolic systems and conventions that are mutually understood by artist and reader and accepted as typical story elements, but which prove to be bewildering to foreigners.[29]

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[28] Frederik Schodt, *Manga! Manga!* (New York: Kodansha International, 1988): xx.

Japanese comics are highly susceptible to graphic manipulation because of the Japanese language. Depending whether one lives in the western or eastern hemisphere, Japanese comics are, or are not, read "backwards," that is, all panels and pages move sequentially from right to left. Usually, the writing in each dialogue balloon is vertical and is read from top-to-bottom and right-to-left. But in fact, the language can be written in any direction except from bottom of the page to top. This flexibility can work as an aid in creative lay-outs, setting of tone, signalling other things both iconically and verbally (see Appendices 29 and 30). The dialogues and onomatopoeic words, for example, can be directed to enhance and control the visual flow of the page.

> What gives the page even more flexibility is the fact that the Japanese language employs not one, but four entirely separate writing systems: ideograms imported from China, two different syllabic scripts, **hiragana** which is cursive and **katakana** which is more angular, and the Roman alphabet. . .Japanese people normally write a blend of all four systems, but by being selective an artist can create different moods.[30]

Another innovation provided by the Japanese comics is in the realm of sound effects. In the strips, one sees sounds that represent noodles being slurped, umpteen types of rain, and the sudden flame from a lighter. They even use sounds to depict noiseless activities and emotions such as a ninja-warrior vanishing in mid-air, leaves falling from a tree, a penis suddenly standing erect, someone blushing, and even the sound of no sound which is a drawn out **shiiiiiiin.** Japanese artists regularly vie for the cleverest onomatopoeia and the readers welcome these (refer to Appendix 31).[31]

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[29] Schodt, *ibid.*, 55-60.

[30] Sabin, *op cit.*, 135.

C. Narrative Movement: Conflicting Perception of Words and Images

No matter how graphic or illustrative the texts are rendered, however, there remains a paradox in the use of words to accompany images in telling a story. While texts help the narrative to move forward--by providing more information, directing the reader's attention, bridging gaps in time and movement--the presence of the text itself **delays** the reading of the story. The duration it takes to read the text already increases the time a reader may spend with one frame rather than if that frame were wordless. But more significantly, texts demand that readers process more information, the meaning of the words alone, and then in relation with the pictures, which itself initiates further re-thinking of already formed inferences, the making of new hypotheses and so on (see Appendices 26 and 32). Since all narratives unwind in time, this process of retardation is unavoidable in any narrative structure.

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[31] Schodt, *op cit.*, 15.

Retardation is more complicated in comics narration, however, because the perception of texts and images is different. Images are perceived instantly and may be experienced at once. Reading requires time since prose must be read in a linear, time-based sequence. In cinema and television, where the motion of images is now seen simultaneously with the sound of the accompanying texts, the two narrational elements, through the use of sight and sound, may attain a synchronicity of comprehension not available to the medium of comics.[32] In comics, images are static and thus may be perceived immediately while the texts must be *read* through time; furthermore, both actions require the use of the same organ for perception. In addition, images in comics are part of a sequence of other images and must then be comprehended in relation to a series of images. Thus, time elapses from the instant of seeing the events and information illustrated, through the process of relating this information to the whole story and framing hypotheses to confirming or disconfirming moment upon reading the text. This intervening time may be deliberately manipulated by the artist to suit his or her own graphic style as well as narrational purposes. The delaying of the reader movement from panel to panel due to the necessary unfolding of the text in time, for example, can be used in marking and controlling the timing and duration of the story in unfolding and may be a means of holding reader interest.

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[32] Shows that are sub-titled require a different process for understanding, compounded by the linguistic abilities and literacy levels of the viewers. Silent films, meanwhile, are also another matter because they contain separate panels of text which often interrupt the temporal flow of the images.

Most of the time, texts are used to complement the accompanying images. Texts provide subtle shades of meaning too complex to be contained in images; they clarify strange, imaginary and other unfamiliar situations and scenes; they re-direct the reader's attention, and signal the continuation of the action and the duration of time. On the other hand, graphic images may be presented which are disconfirmed by the verbal information, or vice versa. While everything included in a comic strip is related to a specific story, some codes are intended to evolve and function in diverse, even opposing parameters in the process of creating engrossing or interesting narratives. Even within one frame, there are multiple codes which do not advance in the same time, nor even in the same direction. Frequently, this involves a conflict between visual and verbal cues which, very often, is consciously intended by the artist.

Within one panel, as in a chain of panels, there are signs which carry more significance and have the capacity to contradict other signs. Hierarchies of signification vary from strip to strip and are deliberately used to produce effects such as those mentioned before (i.e., humor, irony, melodrama, suspense, and so on). Harvey believes that the interdependence of words and pictures gives comics their most unique and distinguishing characteristic and therefore is an essential criterion in evaluation: "in the usual situation, in which both words and pictures are used, a measure of a comics' excellence is the extent to which the sense of the words is dependent on the pictures and vice versa."[33] By applying the principle of visual-verbal interdependence, one can quickly assess the extent to which a given sequence exploits the unique character of the art form to the fullest extent. Harvey insists that illustrated witticisms, no matter how humourous and well-drawn, still may not be considered as outstanding comics if they do not fully exploit the interdependence of texts and pictures. A joke or gag that may be verbally delivered, for example, is not a good representative work of comic art, no matter how funny, since humour is less a defining characteristic of the medium than the successful interaction of words and pictures to evoke a story or gag. The addition of illustration may make a sequence more satisfying but if the images are not essential, then this is less an example of sequential art than one whose humour or message depends on both words and pictures.

Furthermore, in evaluating the interaction of words and pictures, the demands of the genre must also be considered before judging a panel or sequence for any verbal excesses which may be conducted at the expense of the illustration. Panels in comic strips, for example, particularly the final panel for each installment, have different requirements depending on whether they are continuity strips, gag strips, or even whether they are published daily, as part of the Sunday Comics Section of a newspaper, or part of a series compilation.

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[33] Harvey, *op cit.*, 642.

Whether they are meant to be humourous, suspense-thrillers or romantic must also be considered as each genre unfolds according to its own narrative pace. It would be unfair to use the same criteria for gags and continuity strips, because story-telling strips shoulder a burden that gag strips handily avoid. Plot development often requires exposition and scenes of exposition tend to be "wordy" or "talky". The size and length of comicbooks, meanwhile, allow more words and illustrations to be included but even here genre requirements dictate the amount and effectiveness of word-image interaction. Paradoxically, it is common to find a superhero speaking endlessly while fighting when the absence of texts at these instances would considerably hasten the battle scene. Since the demands of this genre and the demands of space or style of narrational thrust allow no other place in the sequence for the hero-villain confrontation as well as their respective explanations for motives and purpose, fighting and explications must be conducted simultaneously to thrust the story forward and cause suitable reaction or counter-action in the formulation of the climax.

Captions and narration would be intrusive, too detached, and would contrast heavily with the directness and fury of the combatants' fast-paced actions which solicits more reader involvement. The appendices provided will show how the retardation process is skillfully employed by artists to make their strips unique and more absorbing. The absence and presence of texts in a frame, the length and amount of texts in a frame, the size of the frames in relation to other frames, are all utilized for manipulating the tempo of the unfolding narratives (see Appendices 33 to 35).

D. Rhythm of the Narrative: Timing and Duration

The order in which one perceives the various textual and pictorial elements of a single panel--not to mention a series of panels--depends on eye movement. Interestingly, eye movement in a panel is determined in the West by both the left-to-right, top-to-bottom conventions of reading and by the freer patterns associated with the contemplation of pictures. A good comics artist knows how to work the two seemingly unrelated eye operations to his advantage. Most succcessful comic art work follows the pattern of eye movement as directed by Lichtenstein in "Eddie Diptych" in which he ordered his textual and pictorial elements so that the most coherent pattern of perception followed the most natural movement of the eye (see Appendix 11 and 35).

The tendency for a series of comic art panels to move the eye along in a prescribed pattern suggests the second facet of ordering in comics--duration. The concept of panel duration proves more strongly than anything else that the textual apparatus influences the manner of perception in comic art. Duration not only refers to the period of time depicted in the panel drawing, whether it be a single instant or a longer interval but, in addition to the pictorial representation of time intervals, refers to the time allotted the viewer to perceive each panel picture (including the length it takes for one to read the text). The time to be spent in reading each panel is carefully controlled, in that the text actually *determines* the amount of time spent viewing the scene (see Appendices 36, 33 and 34). Depending on what the text says, readers eagerly proceed to the next panel, search the current one for confirmation, or refer backwards to whatever was missed in the previous panel. Each panel, however, no matter how many verbal and pictorial elements are included in it, eventually pushes the reader forward into the next panel, according to the flow and pace of the story's continuity. Each drawing in comics has its allotted reading time, without which narrative continuity would be severely hindered.

The power of the panel text to establish a time duration for the pictorial element holds true in a variety of pictorial situations. A panel may represent a single instant--a fist hitting an assailant--or it may depict a scene that would take several moments to obtain--a conversation among two or more characters. But in either case, the text will influence the amount of time allotted to the scene in the reader's act of perception. A long-panel may actually be divided into multiple frames, usually cut according to the various segments of conversation.

The panel with a series of pictures becomes in fact a tableau, a frozen scene which comes to life in segments. Each segment comes alive the moment the reader pays attention to it and only so long as the reader's attention is on it; each group of conversants is in motion only during its speaking moments, and only as their lines are being read. Due to the graphic impact, however, the semblance of continuous conversation and the appearance of a single unbroken scene exist simultaneously, creating the effect of a single, united scenario out of a scene that actually unfolds in time (see Appendix 36 and 37).[34] Graphic cues are utilized in the picture so as to blend easily into our perception of the whole--so easily in fact that we are hardly aware of the mental gymnastics necessary to coordinate the time frames. The ease of the reader's perception is ordered by the text so that eye movement and the pace of the story are both controlled. The text both creates and controls the illusion of running time, the "duration" of the scene".

The instantaneous effect of image-perception, meanwhile, allows for the maintenance of the illusion of perceiving a whole. Both the reading of texts and the viewing of cinema involves control over the revelation of the next scene. In the case of comics, however, readers may take in the whole graphics first which may influence the interpretation of the texts, and may even stimulate them to read faster than their usual rate in anticipation of the next panel in the page. Thus the role of the text in ordering visual perception is not merely one of influencing eye movement but also of controlling the temporal aspect of perception.

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[34] Appendix 36: (Jim Steranko *Tower of Shadows* (September 1969): 12). The central row shows another technique in depicting a long panel: this time, a single background is broken up into smaller panels, creating an effect similar to a motion picture camera panning across a set.

In comics, time is a function of space, and panels may serve as divisions of time. The succession of panels in comics is the mechanism by which timing is achieved, and carefully controlled timing enhances the drama of every event. The narrative flow (how the author conceives of the passing of time in a particular sequence) and time flow (how it is perceived by the reader) are, however, seldom coincindental. Furthermore, they must both be weighed against actual reading time. The presentation of images and words must always correspond to the intentions of relating a story, where some information may be privileged in order to create the desired narrative effect.

Although the control and manipulation of information is characteristic in any storytelling, there is an added dimension in comic art because it is primarily visual and the format of comics is such that the reader can actually read any one panel he or she fancies. The comics artist must rely on a tacit agreement in reading competencies built up in reading comics so that readers will follow the pattern set up for the best presentation of the story. The reading manner in western and eastern countries, for example, differs in direction such that even "instinctive" eye movement would also vary.

Another distinct consideration of the temporal aspect in comics is the seemingly limitless and open-ended concept of time in it. Time, for instance, may also be reversible. Often characters will go back decades or more in time and start the cycle all over again potentially thrusting the narrative in a different direction. Comics are also ahistorical in that there is almost complete absence of teleology. Events that took place in the past usually have not the slightest influence on the events taking place in the present, at least not in a strictly causative sense. Radical changes may be introduced in one issue that completely contradict information provided in earlier ones. In addition, the most popular comicbooks often provide the feeling of an eternal present tense; characters do not age with their "celebrity life" while the background and settings which are ambiguous and fantastic may rarely be equated to any particular time period.

Concluding Remarks

Comics is the art of graphic story-telling. The incorporation and interdependence of words and pictures gives the comics their distinguishing characteristic and therefore should count in the evaluation of "good" or "bad" comics. The visual-verbal blend principle is the first principle of an aesthetic theory of comic and is very important since it derives directly from the nature of the art. But it is also only the first step in the process of evaluation, and must not be applied with inflexibility. The notion of genre, for example, provides grounds for the modification of the visual-verbal blend principle to accommodate the special categories or genres of the comic strips or comicbooks into which they may be classified, and in order to account for the different purposes served by different genres. Another consideration in the evaluation of comic concerns the time period an artist and his work entered the history of comics. Different artists from different times have brought particular ingredients of sequential art to a higher point of excellence or development than previously achieved; though they may still be judged lacking when compared to standards of today. To some extent, although we may judge the new achievements by the older standards of the appropriate tradition, it would be unjust toward the old standard bearers to judge them too harshly by measuring them against the new emerging techniques that are creating new traditions and new, more sophisticated standards. In the same way, the illustrative virtuosity that makes the graphic impact more visible may also temper an inflexible application of the evaluation on visual-verbal equality, especially since in sequential art, the writer and illustrator are still often separate individuals rather than one.

Reviewing entries in the many compilations, anthologies and encyclopedias of comics, one deduces that the principles of inclusion were derived from "valuative" choices, implying that there already exists a standard--an aesthetic theory of sorts--by which some strips and books can be condemned as "bad" while others endorsed as "good." In practice, then, there seems to be an aesthetic by which comics can be analysed and evaluated; it needs only to be articulated and developed in order to open the way to serious critical study. To articulate an aesthetic theory of comics, we need a vocabulary tailored for comics derived from the most distinctive aspects of the art form. Some of the features essential to such an analysis as discussed include: narrative breakdown, gutter and closure, use and design of balloons, layout, panel composition and style, genre requirements, and control of narrative pace and flow which more or less make up the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of comics.[35] Criteria for excellence in comics then may be measured by the artist's ability to meet--if not surpass--the standards of the tradition in which he or she works; this would then entail an evaluation of his individual combination of the ingredients that make a comic strip or comicbook. Ideally, he or she must not only continue in the established tradition and meet the highest standards of it, but also expand the tradition, employing techniques that add new dimensions to the art, challenging the form and its aesthetics to achieve constant creative change and development. It is a positive sign for comics that this seems to be happening now in the wake of the boom of graphic novels in the late 1980s.

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[35] Graphic style is to the visual character of comics what diction is to language: each is so peculiarly distinct to every practitioner that relations it may have to such external matters as story is very subtle. Although there are several "schools" of realistic drawing, there are as many styles within each school as there are cartoonists. One can describe a cartoonist's style, and may then determine whether the style is appropriate to the subject. Beyond that, however, evaluations based upon style become largely a matter of personal taste. Thus, visual elements of lay-out and composition and the use of other visual elements, such as panels and balloons, are more amenable to analysis and evaluation.

Regarding the reading of comics, however, there are no easy solutions to the contentious relation between text and image since, as mentioned above, the difficulty of synchronizing words which unfold in time to the instantaneity of graphic inscriptions remains. In addition, the two mediums possess varying degrees and capacities for explicitness. While a graphic image is as explicit as it is drawn, the nuances of tone and expression in textual clues may not be signalled as explicity (or in as short a time) as the graphic portrayal of gestures, facial and bodily expressions. In the same way, abstract and complex thinking and explanations may not be as effectively represented drawn as when stated in words. However problematic this conflict, it nevertheless remains essential to the existence and creativity of comic art, as well as to the process of reading in the medium.

While it is obvious that prose must be read in a linear, time-based sequence, and pictures can be experienced at once, the peculiar and wonderfully versatile dialectic of sequential art is that in comic strips and comicbooks, both verbal and visual elements can work both sequentially and simultaneously. Words are indeed set in a fixed order, but captions, dialogue in balloons, and sound effects perform important compositional as well as linguistic functions. We experience panels in comics at once in any order, but as narrative elements, they presuppose a reading order of left-to-right and top-to-bottom. Panel compositions also create thematic and narrative relations which can be characterized as grammatical and syntactical. In addition, an important class of pictures operates primarily as word surrogates, puns, cultural icons, and any pictorial representation that is "verbalized" by being placed within balloons or caption space function only when perceived and translated into verbal terms.

The operation of "reading" comics is based, like other language or sign systems, on previous concepts and understanding of codes within the system. These codes are defined by the mutual agreement of those using the "language" or "sign system." While easily manipulated to be indicative of many things, these codes ultimately become conventions which define and uniquely construe a system. In comics, the search for meaning basically rests on two factors: the recognition of the genre's problematic textual form, on the one hand, and the reciprocal relation between author and reader, on the other. Just as author and reader must function within the sign system intrinsic to comics, critical analysis cannot ignore that here two mediums of expression converge to form a system of signification unique to this form. Due to the integration of images and texts, a spatial dimension is added to a conventional process of reading comprehension which unfolds in time. This, however, does not warrant the need to label the search for meaning in comics as "reading-viewing" with the intention of differentiating in terminology the "reading" of texts from the "viewing" of images. For comics, textual comprehension may be better defined as the activity of deciphering and transcoding in which the object of comprehension is transposed from linear reading to "montage modality." Montage perception, with the vignette as its basic unit, acknowledges the semiotic heterogeneity of comics to traverse a singular space of representation and integrates two elements of signification. Not only are phonetic and iconic images necessarily integrated within it, but a montage reading calls attention to the many other factors participating in the structuring of a comics text. The technique of cropping and juxtaposing associated with a montage requires the careful selection of details within a vignette, as well as the sequencing and overall formatting of a chain of vignettes for an intended narrative.

The fluidity of the semiotic process is presupposed in reading sequential art. Rather than pre-determining the system of the text, this montage technique opens the text into a discursive field where potential meanings and subjective relations are capable of critical transformations as well as stabilizations. More significantly, it stimulates an exploration of the possibilities of a semiotics of the figural discourse. The communication processes in comics include the comprehension of a narrative in images and affirm that pictorial art need not always "stand" outside of writing, but by itself may be "written." The montage of the reading of comics thus complicates the priorization of language in a logocentric tradition. The giving of equal interpretive weight to comics' graphic and textual signs systems indicates ways in which the problematic of "writing" might encounter and re-define, indeed might be re-defined by, the intelligibility of figural discourse.

In Western culture, writing seems to retain an epistemlogical privilege which, in occupying and reducing the visual field, opposes it. In this manner, the intelligibility of figural discourse is constrained as that which either falls short of language or exceeds meaning, and therefore, whose significance must be mastered by the inscription into the familiar--writing. It is within the field of multiple signification, such as that of comics and cinema, characterized by the heterogeneity of its matters of expression and the play of multiple signifying systems, that the potential of the figural as a mixed and permutable "sign" occupies the field of its greatest reduction or liberation. The task of the critical analyses of comics, then, should go beyond comparison with and derivation from, other narrative forms, such as the short story or novel, as well as go beyond an evaluation according to graphic and visual arts criteria. Instead, a critical study of this field should demonstrate that comics constitute a unique narrative genre ultimately forged by its own technological, formal and stylistic conditions of representation.

Chapter Three

Responses to Comicbooks and the Concept of the "Popular"

The concept of "popular culture" has remained a powerful and pervasive element in cultural analyses and is now an object of study in a variety of disciplines--literature, history, anthropology, and communications--each of which approaches and constitutes the concept in different ways. The tendency in all of these disciplines, however, is to assume "popular culture" as an unproblematic term, and then to defend or attack its manifestations, or, alternatively, to construct "popular" culture as a rallying cry. Unfortunately, the study of popular culture is bogged down with connotations that help advance neither the intellectual space nor range of consideration for critical studies. The focus of this chapter will be to analyse how varying perceptions and discourses about popular culture are implicated in the discourses used in describing and evaluating comicbooks. This chapter is not concerned with producing in-depth analyses of particular texts or, in the process, with coming up with a defininitive meaning of the "popular." Rather, it is concerned more with sketching an account of the assumptions about culture and history that lie behind the early analyses of sequential art. In conducting this account, it will also be possbile to obtain perspectives on the limitations of existing cultural histories of popular forms and, by extension, on some inconsistencies or outdated notions in the discussions of popular culture. The analysis will then move between recalling some specifics of particular debates about comicbooks, the development of theoretical accounts about it and a consideration of the correspondences and consequences of debates about popular culture. After making observations about the history and evolution of comics, and outlining its nature, definition and significance in the previous chapters, attention is now focussed on critical discussions of this cultural form, the languages in which comicbooks have been discussed, and the ways in which these discourses have affected the history and politics of the production and consumption, as well as the development and public perception of comicbooks.

My reasons for opting to examine responses to sequential art are several. It is a relatively new cultural form, compared to folktale, song, theatre, and the like, and therefore might offer possibilities for developing new categories of cultural analysis and for questioning the adequacy of received ideas about cultural and social relations. Discussions of any cultural form inevitably involve questions of aesthetics, history and politics. Clarifying the common perception or categorization of comicbooks as a "popular" form, and analysing the traditional critical ambivalence in responding to sequential art as a valid cultural product, brings up aspects of the notion of "popular culture" that are best perceived as problematic rather than definitive. I am also interested in the analysis of responses to comicbooks because this medium was widespread before, and is currently experiencing a "renaissance;" it has been attracting avid responses not only to the form itself but to the products that comic characters have generated as other forms of social merchandise or commodity. These have become ingrained in modern sensibility, especially in the American consciousness. Again, in the range of responses to comics and its by-products--in the press, by critics, by fans, or by cultural theorists--there is a level of energy which attests to a cultural and social debate that is very much alive and connected with many other aspects of modern life such as technology, media, communication and graphic arts. That the majority of the criticism of comicbooks, except for a few recent ones, has largely failed to produce new concepts for exploring cultural forms, social relations and hierarchies, or even acknowledged that they might be required, is a measure of the newness and the difficulty of the problems addressed in this study. This chapter, then, shall attempt to relate the development of critical discourses about comicbooks to the wider context of popular culture while questioning the usual impressions of the concepts, relations, hierarchies and standards in the social and cultural spheres of modern life.

The discussion will focus mostly on the responses to sequential art by American and British critics, theorists and publics. Given the more substantial amount of research on sequential art in Europe, this may seem surprising. But the proposition that the development of political, literary and theoretical languages with which to analyse popular culture has to be given the specificity of a national context cannot be emphasized enough. Sequential art, particularly comic strips, has been popularly acknowledged as an American form, and its influence on comics and comics audience worldwide cannot be disputed. And, although European comicbooks have outdistanced American ones in the range of themes, narratives, and forms of visual impact for at least the last two decades, the form and content of sequential art in the United States, Canada and England quickly caught up in the mid-1980s.

Critical responses to this medium in the United States, however, have lagged behind European examples and seem to have flourished only in the last five years. Scrutinizing the development and sporadic popularity of comicbooks in the United States throws light on many arguments of the critics' and general public's appraisal of the medium and its form and contents, and reflects the radically changing tendencies in thinking about culture and the "popular." In the specific history and development of comic strips to graphic novels, for example, one sees the development of recognizable and distinctive responses to the medium, characterized by patronage, paternalism, and obsessive return to the "literary" or concepts in cinema criticism. This latter gesture is particularly ironic as a medium itself once labelled "popular"--the cinema--is now being used as a legitimizing medium for sequential art.

In the process of establishing the merits of comicbooks as a new cultural form, explicit and implicit cultural hierarchies must be examined. Accordingly, this examination will necessarily touch upon arguments or charges about cultural decline in a wider context. It would be difficult to understand the compelling influence of Frederic Wertham and the consequences of his attack on comicbooks in isolation from the American political context of the 1940s and 1950s which spawned it. We need, therefore, to examine the country's social and cultural ideals in order to decipher the rise and "need" for underground comix to rebel against the definition of the all-American boy, the family as an institution, prevailing middle-class bourgeois values, and so on.

In the meantime, the most popular comicbooks read mostly by male adolescents present a specific and interesting commentary concerning the relations between culture, history, national identity and social success. The unquestioning patriotism of superheroes unashamedly fighting for Uncle Sam while remaining assured of recurring and unfailing victory against the enemies of country and society provides the example of a social text worthy of examination. The representation of enemies and villains in these comicbooks is highly dependent on the social and cultural relations of the United States at any one time, and prevailing ideas of unity and conformity. The study of comics necessarily invites investigation in this more sociological realm.

In the process of discussing the development of comicbooks and the responses to them, one becomes aware of the problems the concept of the "popular" poses for debates within the dominant culture and the categories relevant to define it, e.g., history, national identity, institutional stability, monetary resources and productive power, among others. In previous studies, representations and ideas in comicbooks which suggest cultural hierarchies and differences have been usually cloaked in general cultural terms, as if these differences were simply a matter of audience, taste, or preference. Only recently have critical responses to comicbooks referred explicitly to the assumptions about class, age, race and gender which underpin the differences and reveal the biases in the environment in which they are received and reviewed. In tracing the changes behind responses to sequential art, one may perceive the complex and focal points of cultural studies in re-constructing the concept of the "popular" by accounting for cultural differences and practices NOT in reference to intrinsic or external values (how good, how beautiful) but by inferences to the overall map of social relations and practices (in whose interests, by whose estimation).

The sudden prestige granted to adult comics or graphic novels attests to the need for caution in evaluating new cultural forms strictly within the confines of either intrinsic or external values. Graphic novels increased both in quality and quantity since the mid-1980s and are now part of a cultural landscape that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. Their present cultural status and favorable reception cannot be traced solely to the refinements in their formal and structural features. The following list, for example, provides a partial enumeration of some of the changes in the production, distribution and marketing of comicbooks which has influenced the perception and reception of these books: the amount of disposable income now available to former adolescent comic fans; the increasing number of people who "grew up" with comics now in positions of power in the publishing business; the spread of new scholars and critics who grew up in a multi-media environment of learning and cultural refinement; the growing appreciation of other graphic arts like films, videos and television; the formation of an *auteur* system that gives the artists more creative freedom; the sale of comicbooks in specialty stores and bookstores rather than newsstands; developments in technology; the multi-media approach to promoting comicbooks characters and stories; and finally the increased contemporary awareness and availability of comicbooks from Europe and Japan. All these and other factors have greatly influenced the recent boom of comicbooks in America, the changes in the medium's form and contents, as well as its critical reception and type of audience. Sequential art is gradually shedding the stigma of triviality to establish itself as a genre capable of rivaling other narratives and signifying practices in the process of producing and representing reality.

The Popular as Inferior

Comics have been described as a form of popular culture for several reasons in a gesture which shows the ambiguities involved in conceptualizing the "popular"; these reasons also recall the on-going dialogue about hierarchies and definitions in culture itself which guides comicbook interpretations in this study. First of all, comics is seen as a popular form because of its difference from those forms favoured by the dominant or official culture. It is "popular" culture by default since it does not meet the criteria for serious cultural significance. Critics of comics constantly refer to its difference from literature, often comparing the experiences of reading literature and "reading comics." Sequential art, primarily perceived as a visual form, is deemed both inadequate and/or too explicit for a culture which confers preeminence on the written word. Reading literature is seen as offering free play to the imagination, while comicbooks are overtly explicit and thus produce passivity. Too many factors and other people intervene between the "creator" or author and the audience. Reading, according to this theory, should allow for direct access to an author's thoughts and language, whereas creative expression in comics, or other popular forms, is constantly hampered by the industrial and technical constraints of the medium. Furthermore, popular forms like comics are more sales or profit-oriented and thus are capable of compromising excellence or artistic merits for wider appeal which translates into more sales.

Therefore, the creators themselves often concede creativity because they are restrained by such factors external to the medium as deadlines, editorial decisions, space allotment, and so on. This practice contrasts highly with the presumed purity of artistic expressions and the unrestricted range and freedom found in novels, poetry, and other forms of art deemed serious by the principal culture.

Fictional narrative relegated to the "popular" is found wanting when compared to works of literature which consist of the "finest human experience" and, since created by individual authors, are capable of evoking a "genuine personal response."[1] Popular culture, collectively and commercially produced, is stereotyped, formulaic, anonymous, and deficient in "human experience" according to this view. Consequently, sequential art is described as an improverished form of culture, hence "popular." Here, one sees the equation of "popular" with "base" or "inferior" which has characterized many discussions of popular culture. Such notions have also led to a rather extended rejection or trivialization of comics and caused a dearth of serious critical attention to it.

The Popular and Impermanence

Sequential art is also described as "popular" because of its ephemeral nature. Dominant forms of culture are institutionalised in libraries and galleries or in ways that will ensure their preservation and their centrality to the cultural debate. The institutions of comics, on the other hand, are notorious for their impermanence as objectified by their product's form, often referred to as "throwaway entertainment." Until recently, there also seemed a strange reluctance to engage with any notion of the history or continuity of this medium. Only now are there noticeably more attempts to document the popular or critical memories of comics and the comics industry. Unfortunately, a vast amount of primary material has already been irretrievably lost. Due to the scarcity of organized and existing accounts about the industry and the conditions and decisions therein, most research into the early days of comics must be constructed from the memory or perspective of "industry insiders." This ephemeral quality assures sequential art exclusion from those cultural discourses founded on the notion of continuity and tradition, and whose merits are gauged by their enduring qualities. Comics is thus largely denied the serious critical and theoretical attention given to other forms of communication and expression due to the long-standing fallacy of equating the most prevalent form of the medium--the physical comicbook--as BEING the medium itself. The wrong, but persistent, perception of the actual comicbook as the medium itself has prompted many changes in the present production, distribution and sales of comicbooks. There is currently a noticeable shift of emphasis on "books" rather than "comics," as evidenced, for example, in the re-naming of comicbooks to "graphic novels" as recent crops of comicbooks published in North America increasingly aspire to a "book-look," similar to the format of comicbooks in Europe and Japan. In the same vein, comicbooks are now sold in bookstores and specialty stores, which has enhanced their cultural status among the general public, and has likewise modified its group of readers. Much like any product subject to a semiotic reading, the socially determined place of appearance influences the decision of the comics reader, including its critics. Where comics are placed and seen, who reads and talks about comics, what comes before and after them and what surrounds the perception of the medium are all aspects which attest to the fact that the place of the medium is related to its meaning and that the location and environment of comics have semantic value.

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[1] Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (California: Pacific Books, 1971): 18.

While comicbooks themselves may be ephemeral, the medium and form are not. In fact, many acclaimed directors and scriptwriters of film, television and video admit their indebtedness to comics for refining aspects of their art. Many mythologies, characters, anecdotes and forms of humour which originated in comics are deeply ingrained not only in American consciousness but have found their way into a worldwide system of reference. The language, characters and narratives in comics do not exist devoid of ideologies, doctrines, and biases. Given the ubiquity of the medium and its influence on a large portion of the population, it is difficult to imagine that sequential art did not, in an enduring way, participate in or contribute to the cultural debates or struggles of the medium's surrounding social environment.

General Accessibility Spells Mediocrity

Comics is often described as a "popular" cultural form simply because it is well-liked and has most probably touched the lives of everyone at one point or another. This observation can be made in relation to comics as a whole, in relation to particular types of comics--superhero comics, humourous comics, science fiction, horror, and romance are among these at the top of the list--or in relation to by-products and spin offs from comics in whatever other form of merchandise. The power and popularity of comics and the characters generated from them as a whole, however, have generally been problematic for critics, simply because the other, more negative meanings of the "popular" are always present in the margins. Comics, for example, is seen as "popular" in its general accessibility (contrary to catering to a "cultured" or "cultivated" few), its pandering to mediocrity, and in its broad appeal to a general, acquiescent public which is characterized as unsophisticated and hence easy to cater to. As a result, critics tend variably to joke about their predilection for comics, insist on their ordinariness, feel defensive about their topic, clutch to camp sensibility, anxiously cite the assimilation of comics in avant-garde circles, refer to the status of comics as the ninth art in Europe and assert their discrimination and difference from the common reader.

Often, the negative associations of "popular" win out over the descriptive, and the hierarchy of cultural forms is reintroduced. This is frequently accompanied by the explicit project of improving comics, of elevating popular taste, and of offering cultural leadership, much like the strategies employed in approaching cinema and television. Seen like this, cultural distinction has come to imply a segregated or specialised domain of the aesthetic removed from the rest of life. The paradigm of defining "culture" and "art" here is constituted in a circular movement which seeks both to evidence artistic value and at the same time to find it a guarantee of itself and its own methods and products.

The debate between general accessiblity and cultural authenticity is usually based on the concept of cultural authenticity in the sphere of the literary: comicbooks are measured against the narratives and characterization found in the novel or are measured against a set of cultural values derived from literature. Given this criteria of evaluation, comics are naturally almost always found wanting. This attempt to designate the particular, historically specific modes of representation which have characterized the novel as a guarantor of the worth of all cultural forms cannot be impartial. Once more, this emphasis on the criteria of other literary modes is a testament to the importance of the "literary" as an articulation of agreed cultural values. Confronted by this tendency it would seem that there is no way to respond to the democratization, or accessibility, represented by comicbooks and other popular forms of expression except in terms of decline, and loss of authenticity. The frequent movement between the realm of literary criticism and the analysis of popular culture has tended to hamper the development of a specific language for the analysis of popular narratives in general, and sequential art in particular.

Representations in Comicbooks

One other way in which comics is implicated in discourses of the "popular" encompasses two seemingly contrary notions. It is seen both as (a) constitutive of and (b) rebelling against the ideas of the people and the nation. At any one time, readers are cognizant of a hegemonic or dominant mentality and, accordingly, comics are perceived as either rebelling against or catering to this mentality. Critics frequently echo this sort of construction, either attempting to align comics with those that assert legitimization of the common or dominant cultural values, or criticising comics for falling behind the "standard American." Either way, the definition of prevailing ideas of "people" and "nation" are implicated. To what extent do comicbooks celebrate dominant viewpoints? Especially after the institution of the Comics Code, comicbooks are seen as offering constructions of social relations which make a certain unified notion of "the American people," the very same paradigms that are ironically de-constructed in more recent graphic novels.

Arguments about how comicbooks deliberately and playfully engage the interests of their readers will be discussed in more detail in the next two chapters though it must be mentioned here that establishing a legitimation/criticism dichotomy ignores the complexity of the issue. Argumentation itself, for example, may be more a matter of degree than of absolutes. And even the most fundamental social criticism appearing in mainstream media may, in certain instances, serve to legitimate social values and structures, albeit in the disguise of criticism. As Gitlin shows, oppositional movements can be "framed," their voice and arguments distorted and labeled as deviant and wrong, in such a way as to depoliticize them.[2]

Some critics reject the dismissal of all television as debased and corrupt, and try to establish a hierarchy within the forms of television, either in terms of different channels (shopping channel vs. all-news channel) or in terms of different genres (soap operas vs. current affairs). The same is true now with sequential art.[3] Hierarchies are established between graphic novels and superhero series and humourous ones, bound volumes and loose-leaved or single issues, traditional superheroes and mature, ironic new ones, established artists and unknowns. Even the publishing houses are ranked according to putative value.

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[2] Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980): 44ff.

[3] That such divisions cannot actually be related exactly to other social and cultural hierarchies is a problem for both types of critics, who constantly risk the ignominous slide into utilizing the concepts of the problematic "popular."

Unlike television, however, whose almost intrusive accessibility makes its representations of reality available to most members of all social classes, the differences in comicbooks are already visible at the point of consumption. Reading comicbooks entails more activity than watching television; it often requires the choice and purchase, and sometimes collection, of issues with variable publication dates and frequency. These activities are performed repeatedly, usually weekly or monthly, as opposed to the convenience of daily turning on a television in one of several rooms. There are also more representations of all kinds of social reality available in television simply because of the immense quantity of types of programmes available: newscasts, advertisements, game shows, documentaries and so on. Such programmes are aired almost twenty four hours allowing one to anticipate them for viewing or simply chance upon them while channel surfing. Representations in comicbooks are already circumscribed by the amount and type of periodicals purchased, and for the longest time the assortment of comicbook genres was not very broad. Even in the case of comic strips, the difference between the dominant and the marginally popular was never particularly visible at the point of consumption since strips began appearing in newspapers and, even presently, are still published within newspapers and magazines. Furthermore, the reading of comicbooks denies the possibility of the kind of interactive discussion and sharing which often attends group television viewing, or the reading aloud or re-telling of comic strips in communal settings--i.e., the sharing of newspapers within the home, workplace, and such public places as a doctor's office, trains, or subway stations. The audience perception of differing media concerning their content and significance is influenced by the differing circumstances which frame telelvision and comic strips and which allow for communal forms of qualification by readers.

Like any other medium, comicbooks may be read on different levels, but in gauging critical responses in general, they seem to be more prone to be read as legitimizing or rebelling against rigid social categorizations because of the lingering association of the medium with adolescents or the avant-garde. More nuanced assessments of cultural practices and differences, however, may be detected in aspects which were formerly identified as similarities and continuities in comicbooks. The labelling or classification of comicbooks has been getting increasingly difficult, as has the identification of its readership.[4] Earlier critical attempts to distinguish genres within comics and the connections between types of comics and readers were conducted in general cultural terms which tended to account for such differences as if they were simply a matter of age and taste, instead of examining and explicitly referring to the issues of social class, gender and opportunities which underlie these differences and preferences.

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[4] Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 2ff.

In undervaluing the grounding of differences at the level of social dimensions instead of simply cultural ones, there is a tendency to see the popularity of comicbooks as a symptom, or perhaps a source, of a certain cultural homogeneity. Readers are united by the fact of their reading comics. Critics, government committees, and the comicbook industry admit to this by their insistence in giving an "identity" or definitive description to the "groups" who read comicbooks. The demographics of this homogeneity have been used as the basis for sporadic attacks on comicbooks by educators, child psychologists, and concerned authorities, as well as by those involved in the manufacture of the medium in order to plan for and improve their merchandise and merchandising strategies. Both camps endow more social and political substance to this unity, assuming that readers of comicbooks form coherent, non-hierarchial groups who share cultural and political values. This exemplifies the fluid shifts in the significance of "the popular"--from a term of legal and political relations to a synonym for the "general public." This is an interesting tension utilized in the discussions of sequential art as a form of popular culture. While one set of arguments tends to reproduce existing social and cultural hierarchies (culture in terms of "elevated" and "base"), the other tends to repress them in the name of the "audience" or the "man in the street" (as in wide and well-liked or trendy). Thus, difference and distinction can be acknowledged at the level of the cultural where they can be represented as natural, but are consistently removed from discussions of the social dimensions of comics which also tend to overlook what roles comicbooks might have had in the construction of notions of "the popular."

Cultural Collapse

Evaluating responses to sequential art raises exactly the sorts of questions about the relation between cultural forms and social and political structures central to the attempts to find new categories and new ways in studying cultural forms. Even the use of one form, comicbooks as a case study, shows the difficulty of thinking social, technological and subjective determinants simultaneously and is a measure of the difficulty of breaking away from inherited debates about social and cultural relations. Within the past decade, a wide range of cultural critics, as well as literary and social historians, representing radically different ideological perspectives, have pointed to the crisis within cultural life. They consider culture to be no longer a unitary, fixed category but a decentered, fragmentary assemblage of conflicting voices and institutions. They draw attention to the prevailing awareness that an "official," centralized culture is increasingly difficult to identify in contemporary societies. Although explanations for this development differ quite drastically from theorist to theorist, as do their responses to it, the common denominator remains a recognition that a "culture" shared by all is continuing to fragment.[5]

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[5] Refer to the Bibliography section of this study to studies done by A. Easthope, Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Woollacott, J. Fiske, T. Gitlin, and C. MacCabe.

As categories of literature and kinds of public continue to diversify and multiply, "culture" becomes a fundamentally conflict ridden terrain.

> The significance of this emerging school of cultural analysis comes from its recognition that all cultural production must be seen as a set of power relations that produce particular forms of subjectivity, but that the nature, function, and uses of mass culture can no longer be conceived in a monolithic manner.[6]

As the concept of "culture" splinters into varying directions, the terms and the framework we use to understand it become ambivalent, even arbitrary. Jim Collins proffers the observation that our culture has become highly "discourse-sensitive" in that:

> how we conceptualize our culture depends upon discourses which construct it in conflicting, often contradictory ways, according to interests and values of those discourses as they struggle to legitimize themselves as priviledged forms of representation.[7]

An on-going proliferation of popular narratives, the unpredictable diversification of their publics, and the increasingly serious attention given to these forms attests to this "struggle for legitimization." Amidst the rise of varied textual production and social diversification, analyses of cultural forms must rest on expanded definitions of culture, media and communication and changed criteria for the designation of valid objects of study. Cultural analysis must act on the democratic principle assumed by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* that the discourses of all members of a society should be its concern, not just those of an educated elite.[8]

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[6] Peter Davison, "General Introduction," in Peter Davison, et al, eds. *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication, Vol. I: Culture and Mass Culture* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1978): viii.

[7] Jim Collins. *Uncommon Cultures. Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989): xi.

As more and more kinds of texts and forms of discourses compete to define for themselves their cultural and social space, the connection between language and the distribution of power and the role of discourses in the dissimilation of ideologies, becomes more apparent. Critical studies of television and cinema have exhibited much initiative in exploring these lines of inquiry. The uses of cultural forms to maintain social control, the relations between dominant and subordinate cultural forms, the possibility of cultural authenticity, the necessary relations between technological progress and cultural decline, the corrupting effects of generally accessible forms of culture, the hierarchies imbued in categorizing forms, and the gender roles in cultural production and consumption are all areas which have been explored in this general critical project. Responses to comicbooks have only very recently started locating the medium and its consequences within such discusions. Nonetheless even former ways of talking about comics, when re-examined along the lines of these new perspectives, can be made to participate in the continuation and adaptation of debates about issues central to the evaluation and re-definition of culture, media and communication.

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[8] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). See especially Chapter Two.

Much interrogation of the validity of comicbooks as a cultural form concerns the mass media's "effects and influence" or "hypodermic needle effect" type. This form of cultural inquiry concentrates on the effects of comicbooks in influencing moral and social values, including political ones, and the medium's role in the dissimilation of deficient and rebellious values relative to established authority. To some extent, such questions are unavoidable since comicbooks and strips may be perceived as a widely consumed source of political and dramatic representations (though still far below the range and frequency of television). It is notable, however, as Denis McQuail has pointed out, that we do not ask such questions of other major institutions of communication such as the Church, or the Law, whose legitimacy and responsibility seem to be taken for granted.[9]

But while such establishments are more prominent, and certainly more powerful in creating *partial* representations of reality, it seems more reasonable instead to look at a less culturally pervasive medium such as comicbooks in terms of the ways it contributes to our conception of social and cultural relations, or about the types of experience or knowledge which these books either enhance or marginalize. There are some questionable presumptions underlying the traditional "effects and influence" method. This model treats its subjects as decontextualised, asocial beings who either absorb mass media contents or (luckily) resist them. It also frames the problems in terms of assessing the measurable "effects" of comicbooks on an otherwise stable political and cultural structure, running the risk both of simplifying the communication process and displacing an entire matrix of social transformations onto a single institution.

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[9] Denis McQuail, "The Influence and Effects of Mass Media," in James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott, eds., *Mass Communication and Society* (London: Routledge, 1977): 70-94.

We must not forget that whatever the effects of comicbooks are, it cannot be assumed that the environment is otherwise stable in that it only receives without re-acting. Rather, it is more the case that the environment is a continually changing thing and much more complex in character than that which allows itself to be passively influenced. The truth is that the audience affects books just as books affect the audience, because consumers affect the product just as products affect consumers. Comicbooks have flourished at a time of increased diversity in society's composition and identity. Increased mobility and an attendant intermixing of people led also to the greater mixing of social ideologies and aesthetic preferences. This is reflected in the increasing variety of forms and types of discourses people choose to believe can reflect their reality or the reality they wish to see. People often utilize multiple discourses; those who read comicbooks, for example, usually also watch television and film, and avail themselves of other forms of print narratives. In the face of many factors that are constantly interacting, it is really quite difficult to blame such particular cultural forms as comicbooks with causing the moral deterioration and cultural decline attributed to it by many critics.

Overlooking the general instability of society as a factor is apparent, for instance, in the magnitude of response to Frederic Wertham's attack on comicbooks despite the unsound reasoning of his book and the gaps between his premises and conclusions censuring comicbooks for a range of deficiencies from juvenile delinquency to romanticizing criminal and sexual deviance, and belittling authority. His charges occurred during a time and in an atmosphere imbued with changes and uncertainties about the structure and stability of social institutions. Due to its format and unfortunately close link to adolescents and children, comicbooks were easy targets as scapegoats.[10] From a very early stage, a particular and persistent equation was made between comicbooks and adolescence and, by extension, the moral and spiritual health of the family, society and the nation. This follows the tendency of criticism about media effects to see the family as the focal, and vulnerable, point of social relations. In the case of comicbooks, the family is particularly threatened because its most vulnerable members, children, are ingesting dubious values and ideas about ethics and authority through comicbooks. By 1954, when Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* was published, comicbooks were already long susceptible to outside pressure groups because of their child-oriented market.

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[10] There was a rise in crime and horror comics during the early 1950s which no doubt perpetuated the situation of raids and incessant negative attention, but even while Wertham himself was censuring only the crime comicbooks, the censoring board that was formed as a result, the Comics Code Authority, had blanket authority over all comicbooks.

The ability of pressure groups to influence a medium depends greatly upon its perceived vulnerability to such pressure. Comics were sufficiently vulnerable to outside criticism and pressure because it was perceived as a medium for children and adolescents, and for a long time, it was not clear that they were protected by the First Amendment.[11] Educators and psychologists endlessly debated whether comicbooks corrupt children. In 1940, one of the first descriptions of comicbooks in a professional journal (*Journal of Educational Sociology*) claimed that comics'

> crude blacks and reds spoil the child's natural sense of color, their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter stories. Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers through-out America must band together to break the "comic" magazine.[12]

Quite early in its inception as a medium, the potential for outside criticism from parents, educators, community and religious groups, and especially the government has afflicted comicbooks and already tended to "mainstream" content and discourage themes that might be viewed as corrupting.

In addition to this continuous outside pressure to "mainstream" content, two other factors influenced the content and format of comicbooks in its early years, and steered the medium towards reinforcing dominant social values and institutions: a) the way the organization of the comics industry and its preferred methods for production; and b) the war effort which increased the importance of reinforcing dominant values and institutions to solidify the U.S. sentiment against the Axis menace. It is easy to understand why World War II comicbooks exemplified the medium's purest expression of dominant social values.

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[11] Matthew Paul McAllister, "Cultural Argument and Organizational Constraint in the Comic Book Industry," *Journal of Communication* 40.1 (Winter 1990): 55-70.

[12] Josette Frank, "What's in Comics?" *Journal of Educational Sociology* (December 18, 1940): 54-59.

More indirect was the effect of the basic organization of the industry and the way the medium was produced. As in any medium, there was tension between those industry practitioners who saw their product as a commodity and those who saw it as an artistic endeavour. After the enormous success of Superman in 1939-1940, the comicbook industry expanded suddenly and massively as more and more businesses sought to profit from this new phenomenon. Many early comicbook organizations, especially the smaller companies, were owned by people who had earned sizable amounts of money during Prohibition, not always legally, and who sought to invest this money in easily accessible and successful industries.[13] Thus, in the industry's first decade, the scales were overwhelmingly tipped toward the commodities view where the philosophy of many of the early publishers was

> *do it cheap*. Find cheap labor, pay cheap prices. Low overhead. Tie up as little money as possible. Take out as much money as possible. The results were predictable -- in a few years the bad drove out the good. [14]

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[13] Ted White, "The Spawn of M. C. Gaines," in Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson, eds. *All in Color for a Dime* (New Rochelle, N. Y.: Arlington House, 1970): 25.

[14] *Ibid*., emphasis in original.

By the mid 1940s, production was already highly routinized and the strict divisions of tasks between artists, writers, and editors were not conducive to artistic innovation or autonomy. For artists, especially, economic incentives encouraged simple, quickly produced content. Many artists were teenage boys from modest backgrounds who were willing to work for low wages. They were typically paid by the page which encouraged them to work quickly.[15] The publisher usually owned the rights to the finished artwork, and artists and writers were rarely credited. All these factors encouraged the early comicbook creators to work quickly and to put little artistic effort into plots, characterization, and illustrations. This, coupled with the main audience of the medium, children, reinforced the formulaic aspects and mainstream themes of comicbooks. Comicbooks shied away from themes dealing with sophisticated social criticism and instead opted for plots and characterizations that children could easily grasp. Through the 1940s and early 1950s, comicbooks stressed simple themes such as good versus evil, with clearly established rules for understanding which characters were good and which characters were not.

Despite all these factors which sought to steer comicbooks toward reinforcing dominant views and ideals, negative sentiments reigned in the critical responses to the medium. The appraisal of comicbooks as a serious threat to society culminated in the forming of the strictest and most influential organization ever to have control over comics--the Comics Code Authority formed in 1954 and headed by former New York magistrate Charles F. Murphy, who became the comicbook equivalent of the notorious movie censor Will Hays.[16] Once again, the Comics Code Authority was explicitly designed to "mainstream" the values and messages presented in comic books. One rule, for example, stated that "policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall not be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority."[17]

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[15] Coulton Waugh, *The Comics* (New York: Macmillan, 1947): 350.

> Within its first six months of existence the Authority reviewed 5,000 stories, 200 of which were rejected and 1,300 were revised. Many comic book publishers were pushed out of business. EC (Educational Comics) at first suscribed to the Code but abruptly abandoned it after a story about a black astronaut was to be rejected unless the character was recoloured as white (44, p. 314). Like some other publishers, EC then switched to a larger-sized black and white format that was not subject to the Code.
>
> The Code was a setback for the art of comics, which was forced into essentially infantile patterns when its potential for maturity had only begun to be explored.[18]

There was nothing inherent in the nature of comicbooks that dictated its development as a cultural form economically and institutionally linked to children and adolescents. After all, the earliest comicbooks were bound reprints of strips earlier published in newspapers and enjoyed by adults and children alike.

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[16] During this time, censorship in the movies and television were also getting increasingly stricter. The simultaneity of tighter control among the various popular forms may well be more a sign of general alarm at the pace and scope of the changes happening in society, most of which were perceived as threatening to a recognizable order, and were then projected as corrupting capabilities intrinsic in the forms themselves.

[17] Sabin, *op cit.*, 251.

[18] McAllister, *op cit.*, 62.

However, bereft of the surrounding seriousness of black-and-white columns of print about politics, sports, and current stock market reports, the same strips seemed to give a different impression. The very first comicbooks were given away as premiums for the purchase of children's products. Even these, however, were bound strips of "Joe Palooka" and "Mutt and Jeff," not specifically intended as children's fare. Undoubtedly, it was the 1938 publication of the first superhero, Superman, that launched and guaranteed the success of comicbooks as a medium for the youth. This success was reinforced by Superman's pervasiveness in other media such as syndicated newspaper strips, the sale of other commodities with the Superman character or symbol and, somewhat later, Saturday morning cartoons in the television. Superman stories were published in two periodicals, *Action Comics* and its sister publication *Superman*. By 1941, the two Superman comicbooks sold 1.4 million copies every two weeks.[19]

> Children regarded the early comic books as "their books," the first medium they exclusively could call their own. Ninety-five percent of boys and 91 percent of girls between the ages of six and eleven bought comic books regularly by 1943. Annual sales revenue reached $15 million, approximately 75 percent of which came from children's purchases.[20]

The implications of this new cultural form invading the privacy of homes and school playgrounds were received, and have since then been attached, with suspicion and head shaking among adults. Comic books were very quickly perceived as a "problem." The growth of a cultural form that was affordable, easily accessible and so popular triggered anxiety: how was control to be exercised over the consumption of such cultural forms?

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[19] Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes, Volume I* (New York: Dial Press, 1965): 238.

[20] McAllister, *op cit.*, 57.

The obsession with control and regulations was reflected in the critical discussions of comicbooks. As early as the 1940s, when comic books were beginning to be extremely popular, one can already find the elements that were to dominate the discourses which address comicbooks: a noticeable displacement of social problems onto forms of "the popular"--a strategy not unique to the reception of comicbooks but generally utilized in evaluating new forms of mass media. New popular forms are hardly primarily analysed for their aesthetics or intrinsic formal characteristics but are always evaluated in terms of their impact on society, more specifically, the extent of their merit or threat in upholding values and institutions already in place and in terms of how they conform to or rebel against authority.

Interestingly, the apprehensions and caution which greet new forms tend to revolve around issues related to sex and violence. Perhaps due to the general suspicion in perceiving new forms or because of the general apprehensive atmosphere of cultural decline in the twentieth century, discussions about effects and influences of the mass media and popular culture are usually examined in relation to the vulnerability of order and authority in society and very often become disguised treatises and attacks about sex and violence. A common critique of comicbooks, for example, could be summarized this way: the "problem" is seen as social decay, i.e., too much sex and violence; the "cause" found in comicbooks, and the "solution" is the imposition of one common set of social and moral values, presented in the name of peace and progress. A review of the responses to comicbooks reveals that a large percentage of the critical commentary follows an established pattern of investigation and evaluation. Previous studies of mass media, which correlate the expansion of popular forms and the deterioration of societal norms concerning the family and other social institutions, are reviewed and their negative findings re-articulated.

Violence in Comicbooks

Studies done on mass media, however, especially in relation to sex and violence, are often predetermined by assumptions that bear on the very categories, methods, procedures and therefore results of the research. A pervading sense of cultural decline and social disintegration, for example, overdetermines or sets the tone for such studies. Morag Shiach, in relation to his analysis of television, critiques one of the most influential books on mass media criticism, Eysenck and Nias's *Sex, Violence, and the Media.*[21] Morag Shiach may be quoted at length here because it shows the same assumptions about sex and violence which inform most essays about mass media and popular forms and their role in the deterioration of modern society:

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[21] H.J. Eysecnk and D.B. Nias, *Sex, Violence and the Media* (London: Blackwell, 1978).

> Eysenck and Nias do not examine the history of the concepts of "sex" and "violence" in order to understand the cultural and historical specificity of identifying particular images or acts as "sexual" or "violent." Within any society there is a complex set of legitimate and illegitimate acts of violence, and the meanings of any particular representation can only be assessed in terms of such social norms. Eysenck and Nias ignore the fact that the meanings people derive from particular representations are to some extent culturally specific . . . . (advocate instead) restrictions amountingg to an eradication of all images of sexuality and violence, not considering how violence is represented in a particular text, its relation to a particular narrative, or the extent to which certain forms of violence such as war, are culturally sanctioned while others, such as vandalism, are condemned. Eysenck and Nias merely assume that sex and violence are bad, and their representations dangerous.[22]

The representation of violence in comicbooks has been an overwhelming concern for most critics.[23] They suggest damaging effects from the profuse, repetitive and *graphic* depictions of violence in comicbooks which purportedly incite children to more violent and unrestrained behaviour. Critics also question the danger in portraying the triumph of individualism and wish fulfillment in the guise of comicbook characters, especially in the immortality of superheroes and even some favorite villains. The same critique is levelled at those comicbooks wherein the exploits of cunning detectives suggest by their very existence that the forces of government and law are not sufficient to contain outlaws and sinister powers.

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[22] Morag Shirach, "The Changing Definitions of the Popular," in Gary Day, ed. *Readings in Popular Literature: Trivial Pursuits?* (London: Macmillan, 1990): 77.

[23] See, for example, articles on comics in the journal called *Childhood Education*, especially during the 1940s and 1950s. See also the *Report of the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry*, Vol. 4, (New York: Royal Commission on Violence, 1966).

Violence in comicbooks is often disparaged as pointless and its context irrelevant and irreverent, capable of threatening the innocence of children, inciting aggression, and endangering the stability of families because of the repetitive repesentation of certain types of authority and of the rebellion against them. There is concern that children lose their place and forget their proper relation to society because of too much fantasy. Thus, there is the danger of the erosion of proper and fulfilling relations between parents and children, between authority figures and those under their charge. Apparently, interest in comicbook violence was more inspired by aspirations of "social control" than appreciation and comprehension of the new medium.

This form of interest is also evident in methods of inquiry which do not follow the "effects" tradition. Standing opposite to this form of approach, for example, is the "uses and gratification approach" which argues as follows: the "effects" model treats the audience as a passively encountering mass media, insulated from other forces in society that might influence their perception and reception of the media contents. The uses and gratification approach recognises that audiences are already members of their society and interact with mass media by actively choosing what they will read or watch since they want certain things from them.

In effect, the concern now is not what the media do to the audience, but what the audience does with the media.

As a reaction against the "effects" tradition, this approach to comicbook research took audiences seriously and searched for reasons as to why people watch television or read comicbooks. In effect, the "uses and gratification" approach seeks to discern what needs do these activities satisfy.[24] A famous, and often cited, piece of early research into comics-readership by Wolfe and Fiske came out of this tradition.[25] Wolfe and Fiske showed that children read comics progressively: they go through several phases in reading different kinds of comics--classified as Funny Animal, Superman-type, and True comics--which correspond to distinct phases of their development. The researchers also strongly implied that normal children generally outgrow reading comics in the process of maturation, and that this process may vary from child to child. However, even as they claim that comics "fulfill children's developmental needs," these needs are noticeably classified as ones to be got over as soon as possible. Wolfe and Fiske distinguished between "normal" readers, readers with "problems," and "neurotic" and "psychotic" readers.

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[24] The "uses and gratification" approach was also a reaction against the aftermath of research on propaganda during World War II. Useful introductions to this research approach are Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz, *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current perspectives on gratification research* (Beverley Hills: Sage, 1974), and Karl Rosengren, Lawrence Wenner and Philip Palmgreen, *Media Gratifications Research: Current perspectives* (Beverley Hills: Sage, 1985).

[25] Katherine M. Wolfe and Marjorie Fiske, "The Children Talk About the Comics," *Communication Research: 1948-49* (New York: Harper and Bros 1949): 3-50.

The rather strange form of reader classification employed seems to suggest what the authors wanted to prove; that normal children have reading patterns and preferences different from those with "problems." Not surprisingly, they described children who became and remained comics fans as out of control and neurotic, ones "whose problems had affected their entire behaviour pattern." Wolfe and Fiske portrayed comics reading itself as a neurosis: "The fan does indeed become neurotic, i.e., the habit and characteristics of comic reading gradually engulf his life and affect his entire behaviour patterns."[26] Wolfe and Fiske also talk about fantasy as one of the phases a child goes through but must overcome to reach a "correct attitude" which is described as a "realistic interest in the world." For them, fantasy is escapism, and escapism, being lawless, is potentially dangerous. Anything "fantastic" that is read provides a link with uncontrolled tendencies. They concluded that the sheer fact of reading comics puts children at risk:

> For the normal child, then, comics are a means of healthful ego-strengthening and a source of amusement. Other children do not seem to be so eager to fortify themselves for the experience of life. They do not seem to have emancipated themselves from their parents to any great degree. . .But their belief in their parents seems nevertheless to have been shaken. . .They therefore search for a more perfect father-figure, a being who is omnipotent but, at the same time, tangible and feasible. And such a father-figure they find in Superman. These children become fans. . . For normal children, then, the comics function as an adaptation mechanism. . . For the maladjusted child, the comics satisfy, just as efficiently, an equally

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[26] Wolfe and Fiske, *ibid.*, 29.

> intense emotional need, but here the need itself is not so readily outgrown. The religion of comics is not easily given up. . .[27]

Wolfe and Fiske's research reveals the presumptuous arguments which characterize uses and gratifications research: timeless needs which explain why people use the media, and naive classifications of media content and type. Here, we see yet another approach to comics which does not seek to analyse comics themselves, and in addition, a method which already embodies prejudgements about that which it wishes to establish. Much like the "effects" tradition it is reacting against, the framework of the "uses and gratifications" method is problematic in that its very framework tends to produce or confirm the results already assumed in the initial theory. One such unexamined presumption in a great deal of existing studies about texts and readers of comics is the linking of violence and adolescent boys.

Critics who sought to establish a relation between exposure to violent images in comicbooks and subsequent acts of violence have tended to focus on adolescent boys, generally claiming to demonstrate that "high exposure to comicbooks violence increases the degree to which boys engage in serious violence."[28] Why the link between adolescent boys and violence should be self-evident remains largely unexamined, however. The underlying assumptions followed are simply that: a) violence is innate, b) adolescent boys are prone to violence, and c) comicbooks reduce inhibitions in relation to violent behaviour, and therefore, exposure to comicbooks leads to acts of violence or rebellion.

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[27] *Ibid*, 34-35.

[28] Wertham, *op cit.*, 54.

Seldom, if at all analysed, are the reasons why girls do not resort to acts of violence when exposed to such images on the same scale. That girls do not read as many comicbooks as boys do, however, is not a sufficient reason for the lesser tendency to transform comicbooks violence into real life. Martin Barker, in *A Haunt of Fears* and *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, examines how girls were just as interested in horror comicbooks and crime and detective stories until the mid 1950s when these comicbook genres started catering increasingly and exclusively to boys. Furthermore, girls are just as exposed to other popular forms of entrtainment such as television and cinema which are censured for violence. Why is the influence of violence then so gender-specific? If, among girls, the interest in popular forms which depict violence does not transform itself into violent behaviour in female adolescents, perhaps there is a need to examine more closely the relationship between the formation of social and sexual identity and acts of violence.

Violence should not be assumed as an unproblematic and measurable category, ignoring the possible ways in which representations of violence interact with discourses of class and masculinity. In addition, the extent to which violent behaviour might be explicable in terms of environment and class should also be considered. By overlooking these possibilities, comicbooks are simply seen as expressive of social decline but, in the process of analysis, are removed from the social relations that constantly inflect their meaning and use.

Re-assessing Categories

To conclude, the identification of comics as "popular culture" represents a critique of the categories for the description of the cultural forms and relations in the twentieth century. Thinking of comicbooks in terms of the "popular" indicates a refusal or an inability to engage with many of the medium's varied forms of representations, since it undermines the complexity of the ways in which comics may be understood and the range of meanings it can produce. Clarifying the functions of reader/text relations cannot be defined outside the history and context in which specific texts--some more than others--have conspicuously functioned intertextually to make a plurality of different readings possible. Caution must be exercised in positing a notion of the audience as a social aggregate subjected to the effects and influences of representations in cultural forms, as well as in concentrating on the individuality of spectators whose distinct subjectivity is constructed by the various systems of meaning in which they participate.

By presenting a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between culture and subjectivity than had been previously theorized, many critics have recently effectively rescued an enormous segment of cultural production from the oblivion earlier assigned to it by mainstream critics. Of note here are feminist analyses of mass media, along with those certain British culturalists who, instead of assuming that readers are passive and can be subjected and influenced *en masse*, argue for the active participation of an audience otherwise thought of as a lobotomized media consumer.

But in focussing on the subjectivity and power of readers and viewers, there is the tendency to emphasize or claim a heterogeneity of the audience while assigning a fundamental homogeneity in the production of mass or popular culture; this then also results in a lopsided notion of cultural production. In evaluating reader-text relations, Jim Collins advocates the critical awareness of "conflictive textual production and reception in tension-filled enviroments"; he emphasizes tension-filled and multiple environments to explain the differences in the reading constructed by media consumers. He also recommends awareness that numerous contentious qualities shape the very formation of the texts, as well as their ariticulation.[29] The "mediation" of texts begins at their inception; their original structure and development are shaped by an environment that influences the functions that popular texts would serve for diversified audiences.

The profusion of popular narratives presents different, and even contradictory, positions for potential spectators which merit critical analyses, not merely critical statements or pronouncements. Barker (1989) shows the deplorable fact that numerous studies about media influence hardly acknowledge that they are investigations of ideological effects, nor are the authors themselves aware that they are espousing a particular theory or ideology. This thesis agrees that inevitably, any discussion of mass media influence must involve ideas about ideology since hardly any form of popular culture (or culture in general, for that matter) is free of ideological domination. Positing a space beyond the reach of ideology--a space of "authenticity" where the dominant culture will hold no sway--is possible only within the terms and theory of cultural analysis, and may have no existence outside it. Nevertheless, investigations of mass media and popular forms can still aspire to relative objectivity, that is, a critical analysis characterized by appeals to standards and values that can be understood and shared, and the use of methods that are at least revealed to everyone.

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[29] Collins, *op cit.*, 19.

This chapter has focussed on an attempt to clarify how the origins of certain sorts of judgements about popular culture as debased or irrelevant must be seen in their historically shifting relation to dominant cultural forms. Implied in this analysis is the belief that popular culture matters: it has clearly mattered to those who have sought to classify it or control it, and should now matter to those who seek to challenge existing social, sexual and cultural relations. Examining any form relegated to the popular cannot escape ideological implications, especially in analysing reader-text relations, since factors such as class, gender, race, and age, as well as the conditions for text production and articulation, affect their definition.

Corresponding to this view, the following chapters will focus on examining a particular type of comicbooks--the superhero comics as a genre--tracing the development of the genre, to consider such questions as who reads such books, why and in what way. Examining the superhero comics as a genre will stress the manner in which the involvement of reader and writer could shape the contours of texts. Genres are interesting in that they represent a set of conventions whose parameters are redrawn with each new book and each new reading. Once one thinks of a text as an example of a genre, it can no longer be approached only as an artefact to be analysed in some form of contextless critical purity. Looking at superhero comicbooks as a genre will bring together a range of levels in which these forms operate in our culture, from the pragmatics of production to issues of ideology and language. The functions and dynamics in superhero comicbooks will be used as an example to illustrate how a particular form of discouse, one among the many discourses, competes to define its place and audience in the highly discourse-sensitive society we now live in.

Chapter Four

Superhero Comicbooks

> Commodities like mass-produced texts are selected, purchased, constructed, and used by real people with previously existing needs, desires, intentions, and interpretive strategies. By reinstating those active individuals and their creative, constructive acitivities at the heart of our interpretive enterprise, we avoid blinding ourselves to the fact that the essentially human practice of making meanings goes on even in a world dominated by things and by consumption. In thus recalling the interactive character of operations like reading, we restore time, process, and action to our account of human endeavour.
>
> Jane Radway
> *Reading the Romance*
> 1984

Introduction

Since their inauspicious debut in the newsstands of New York in the 1930s, comicbooks in America have been published in billions of copies for audiences of countless millions. It would be fair to say that most who grew up since the introduction of comicbooks to popular culture have come under its pervasive spell at one time or another. Not until the arrival of television was there a sharp decline in comicbook sales. On the other hand, the television enabled the instant transmission of comicbook-inspired material on Saturday mornings and increasingly during prime time. Eventually, this new medium would help propel the sales of comicbooks and, in the early 1960s, extend the publicity for, and manipulation of, the products of popular culture into an increasingly multi-media base. Today, the comicbook continues to manifest itself, although in different forms from that of its prototype of the 1930s. This chapter will discuss how the changes and development in comicbooks--in the construction and characters of Superhero comicbooks in particular--can be correlated much more closely with the fantasy wishes of readers than most other common forms of popular narrative like television, cinema or romance fiction. This close relation between the genre and readers may be traced to, among others, the cheapness of comicbooks as a commodity; to the general low opinion of the product which bonded those who favoured it and also fostered a strong underground movement; to its well-developed community of fans; to the way comicbooks were produced and distributed; and, most importantly, to the nature of the superhero figure and his adventures and exploits which made it easy and possible to incorporate almost any "neat" idea proffered by those in the industry as well as its readers.

At the height of its popularity in the early 1940s, the comicbook was a unique visual phenomenon. It expressed itself in most cases in a standard magazine format of 64 pages, basically to celebrate the exploits of superheroic characters in action-packed, vividly coloured covers that children found hard to resist. There were also reprints of newspaper comic strips and some original character types, but it was the superhero who dominated the pages of the early comicbook. These were mostly muscular men in brightly coloured tights shown performing remarkable feats of strength and defeating strange villains one after another. The recurrence of this sight and theme in the minds of thousands of children and adolescents over a fifty-year period must have helped the American (male) youth to a better understanding or recognition of their fantasy goals as they related to their personal ideals. But what was primarily to appeal to the visualized fantasies of childhood provided the twentieth century with a pantheon and mythology comparable to those of previous cultures. The superhero figure has developed into a lasting and vigorous presence in American and European popular culture such that the recognition of the Batman or Superman, for example, by millions who have never read a Batman comicbook or seen a Superman film is ensured.

The lasting popularity of superheroes is rather unexpected if we consider the characteristics most familiar to superhero comics: a) the relative simplicity of plot, characterization, and theme; b) the frequent reliance on formulaic plots and traditional symbols; c) the usual presence of an interpreting narrator to direct the stories; and d) the use of simple, cartoon-like illustration with bright, primary colours. While their generic similarities and obvious evocation of archetypes make them easy to remember, most superhero texts seem to be quite undetailed. They seem so similar to each other as to possess very few qualities distinct enough for durable impressions, nor substantial enough to permit the continuing creation of tales over the years. Yet, despite their sameness, superhero comics have endured, have crossed over to other media, and have managed to maintain their almost worldwide presence in popular culture. Closer scrutiny of the genre reveals that preferences for, and the persistence and popularity of, certain superheroes and particular texts belie the seeming interchangeability of these comicbooks. In fact, thousands of devout comicbook fans could enumerate differences in detail that would quell any doubts about the uniqueness of each and every text. Then again, careful analysis of the particulars of these "differences" shows that they are often appreciated in relation to their unexpectedness or deviance from a recognizable convention of a superhero text. This enjoyment derived from the manipulation of established conventions indirectly acknowledges the existence of a "model" or a "paradigm" for such texts. The shifts between repetition and uniqueness, between imitation and imagination in superhero comicbooks will be emphasized in this chapter which, using genre criticism, seeks to discuss superhero texts within the framework of cultural studies.

The analysis of these texts will obviate the necessity of investigating the qualities of individual texts for the purpose of interpreting and determining factors which differentiate good from mediocre texts. The stress here is not necesarily on the presumed merit of texts as evaluated according to standards of literary sophistication. Instead, the aim will be to study the central core of repeated patterns and restated meanings gleaned from a wide variety of superhero texts. This method will lead to concerns more crucial in the evaluation of the comicbook form within a cultural perspective. Such concerns are: what are the defining traits of a superhero; what kinds of superheroes are popular during the important stages in the genre's development; what social realities are most reflected in this type of narrative; who are its producers and readers and how do they participate in shaping the genre; what social trends affect the genre most; in which direction does the genre seem to be headed?

In discussing superhero comicbooks within cultural studies, a number of paradoxes will be immediately apparent: a) the superhero comicbook is a popular art form traditionally known for its apparently hegemonic and sometimes overtly authoritarian texts; b) it is a publishing genre which began to gain a degree of cultural respectability by ducking the 'underground' label at least partially for greater distribution; c) it is an art form which has been handled (if at all) with disdain by the literary establishment, and yet has built up its own heuristic critical discourse through what is still rather misleadingly know as the "fan press;" d) it consists of a body of contemporary mythology from which television and Hollywood have plundered and distributed material; and finally, e) critical perception of the formal and narrative patterns and meanings of comicbooks is often based on an appeal to a common culture although the culture of comicbooks is not necessarily shared by students and scholars of literature. Indeed, the culture of comicbooks may be characterised as one in a power relationship with dominant literary norms. Notions of contradictory norms and power relationships shall be an informing idea in this chapter. An underlying principle is the observation that genres are popular when their conventions bear a close relationship to the dominant ideology of the time. Shifts and changes in a genre do not happen in a vacuum, and looking at how Superhero comicbooks have survived and developed in the last fifty years will reveal some of the reasons and purposes for the paradoxes outlined above.

The Use of Genre Criticism

Taking the approach of genre studies is one way of focusing on the interaction of the complex strands that form superhero comicbooks. It is important to clarify some points about the concept of the genre before plunging into the comicbooks themselves. The word genre conjures up different sets of associations. Often it is now used in the context of popular literature, where it frequently implies "not literature" but rather some low-level formulaic production. But it may also be traced to formalist academic literary critics, for whom it meant established literary forms, with definite rules where a writer's art was shown in their faithful observation of or artful departure from these rules. Some types of literary criticism have come to decree that great writing is to be unique and *sui generis*--literally, each great work creating its own genre. But such conditions of uniqueness and transcendence of the generic would cause problems for evaluating comicbooks which are clearly formulaic and archetypal. The advent of cultural studies and the corresponding increase in attention to varying forms of popular narratives have caused the re-examination of genre and genre criticism. Once again, we are aware of the importance of genre, now not as a set of rules that ought to be followed, but as a framework that is always there to some degree. All texts are dependent on and grow out of other texts such that all texts are variations of varying degrees on previous models that contain rules, structures and patterns that make storytelling possible and the stories recognizable. Nonetheless, the importance of the rules may be that they are there to be broken.

Jonathan Culler (1981) defines genres as groups of norms and expectations that help readers assign functions to the various elements in a work.[1]

The readers know what to expect and why: each genre has its codes and conventions. If we read crime novels, for example, we expect a mystery, an investigator, and a solution. If we read romance we expect a leading man, a leading lady, and true love. In superhero comicbooks, we expect a hero with superpowers, a villain, a confrontation, and a conclusion. Since the norms and expectations of each genre are enmeshed with the norms and expectations of society as a whole, they seem particularly fruitful points upon which to focus. In the case of this study, the focus will be on how power struggles between central and marginal culture enter into and are constructed by the form of the superhero genre, and how and perhaps why these constructions change.

An important principle in studying genre is to realize that each genre grows out of specific social situations and conditions of literary production and consumption. Norms and expectations are not inscribed forever within the text, but are always dependent on the readers' knowledge of the codes. Hence, one is not necessarily always sure which conventions to read by. For example, no one reading Frankenstein in 1818 could have thought they were reading science fiction, but with a history of science fiction we now read it differently.[2] Genres represent a set of conventions whose parameters are redrawn with each new book and each new reading. The concept involves a contract between authors and readers. Once we think of a text as an example of a genre, we can no longer approach it as only an artefact to be analysed in some contextless critical purity. We need to ask who reads such books, why and in which way, seeing them as "texts-in-use." Looking at genres brings together a range of levels in which these forms operate in our culture, from the pragmatics of production to issues of ideology and language. Genres are perhaps, in one way, best understood as particular forms of discourse, that is, special systems within language which allow the possibilities of re-working or subverting rules and standards, where artists and writers within the comicbook industry, for example, can imagine new possibilities for themselves and their art, much like women writers writing within a genre re-work it to express formerly unrepresented concerns and emotions.

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[1] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1981): 123.

Focusing on genre would allow another important and evolving isssue to be explored: what part "pleasure" does or should have in our reading. It can be argued that being gripped by superhero texts with their predictable adventures and unidimensional people is an unworthy way to spend time; that it is to allow oneself to be trapped in bourgeois, patriarchal views of crime and morality. But in emphasizing the importance of play and fantasy in reading, one can counter the interpretation of popular fiction as opium of the masses. Instead, in examining superhero comicbooks as an actively evolving genre, it can be shown that mass culture does not exist purely for the legitimization of the existing order. The persistence and popularity of superhero texts, despite their simple plots and characters, make them suitable for bringing up critical questions as to why we enjoy reading, what are the pleasures it can bring, what are the desires it speaks, and what are its powers of transformation. Each of these issues positions comics within the claims made in Chapter One that they participate in Gramscian notions of ideology and culture making popular culture a site of struggle.

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[2] See Introduction by Maurice Hindle to Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin Books, 1985) which interestingly treats the novel as science fiction.

The superhero comicbooks can be a particularly useful model because within its pages, it brings together the necessity to combat oppressions and an underlying commitment to moral and ideological change with the language of fantasy wishes and utopian desires. With the sophistication of the more recent graphic novels, the once reassuring form of traditional binary oppositions and simple disputes in the older texts have given way to a multitudinous and pluralistic range of images that fit our contemporary existence. The newer texts tackle complex moral dilemmas and diverse political shifts where changes and contradictions cannot so easily be labelled and appraised (see Appendix 39).[3] Often, the superheroes themselves question their role in upholding the law in a world where those in powerful and institutionalised positions prove to have debatable intentions and morality. The world is very different from that of twenty years ago: the bases of power have shifted, and so have ways of understanding them. Old certainties have gone, though new and perhaps equally repressive authoritarianisms have emerged, which in their turn must be challenged. This present world of uncertain directions and kaleidoscopic and contradictory images is increasingly reflected both textually and visually in comicbooks. Yet, the conventions for the genre set over fifty years ago can still be clearly gleaned from the fragmented images and narrative of even the most experimental graphic novel utilizing superheroes.

Generic conventions are especially important in superhero comicbooks because they are a prime way of both understanding and constructing a triangular relationship between the producer, the text and the reader. As John Fiske remarks:

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[3] **Appendix 39**: In more recent comicbook, institutions like the government, police force, even the church, are shown to be rife with corruption. In *Batman: Year One* (March 1987) by Frank Miller and David Mazzucchellli, Gotham's Commissioner of Police attempts to blackmail Lt. Jim Gordon, usually known for his honesty and uprightness. Here, however, Gordon is shown being unfaithful to his wife. The Commissioner threatens blackmail to coerce Gordon into cooperating with him and the Mayor in some illegal activities concerning drug smuggling.

> Genres are not to be seen as forms of textual codifications, but as systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject.[4]

Generic conventions are the structural elements that are shared between producers and readers and they are crucial to the pleasures a genre offers its audience. This can be clearly seen in superhero texts where repetition plays an important role in keeping the genre alive. Children and adolescents still constitute the major portion of comics readers, and publishers can reckon with a fast turnover rate which safeguards the novelty of the genre, and which makes repetitions easy, even necessary. At the same time, many of the heroes that exist today have survived at least forty years of publication, and have undergone changes while retaining what may be termed the "key components" of their identity and the core ideas of their individual narratives. Many of the patterns and meanings which emerge from current texts, as well as the play which is derived from them, rely for their fullest impact on the readers' cumulative sense of significance of the similarities and differences among the individual elements within texts. There is a strong element of intertextuality among superhero texts which forms a progressive series of cumulative knowledge among their readers. This knowledge is developed through reading and following comicbooks, in acknowledging certain texts while disputing or dismissing others.[5] As a popular form, comicbooks can endure in many different forms and may be "re-written" according to the times because it is an on-going art form, it is still "alive." Its continuity and vitality allow every period to apply its own reading codes, its changed vantage points; the texts continue to accumulate sign possibilities which are communicative precisely because the text is inside a system in movement. Comics accumulate sign and meaning possibilities that do not depend on one book, but rather on a series of on-going short narratives. There is a complex intertextuality in comicbooks which opens a greater availability to different readings on both the synchronic and diachronic levels since the genre has existed for a long time, while simultaneously, its nature dictates a drive for perennial contemporaneity. In the context to be used here, a genre is defined less through its conventions and rules, and more as a shifting provisional set of characteristics that are modified as each new example is produced.

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[4] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987): 111.

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[5] There is a general agreement among Batman fans, for example, that the campy Batman television series with Adam West in the 1960s is not at all part of the bat-texts which comprise the key components in defining Batman's identity and psyche. Another example would be the Captain America texts which were published briefly in 1954 which were totally ignored as Captain America was revived in March 1964 as having awoken from being frozen in suspended animation since 1946.

Generic Conventions of Superhero Comics

To study all narratives of the superhero (in all periods, phases, societies, etc.) in the attempt to sketch a general model for this study is utopian and practically unmanageable, thus this study must be deductive. It is obliged to conceive a hypothetical model of description and form, and have this model descend gradually to specific examples which simultaneously participate in the model and depart from it. It is in the levels and manner of their conformities and departures that the analysis will recognize the plurality of narratives, their historical and cultural diversity, their background or influences, as well as the uniqueness of the genre itself.

A logical place to start in ferreting out the characteristics of the superhero narrative is in scrutinizing its two most apparent features: the hero and his adventures. For this purpose, John Cawelti's description of the basic structure of a hero's adventure is very useful, pertinent to the point that it begs to be included here:

> The central fantasy of the adventure story is that of the hero . . . individual or group . . . overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important moral mission. Often, though not always, the hero's trials are the result of the machinations of a villain, and, in addition, the hero frequently receives as a kind of side benefit, the favours of one or more attractive young ladies. However, the interplay with the villain and the erotic interests served by the attendant damsels are more in the nature of frosting on the cake. The true focus of interest in the adventure story is the character of the hero and the nature of the obstacles

> he has to overcome. This is the simplest and perhaps the oldest and widest appeal of all formula types. It can clearly be traced back to the myths and epics of earlier times that have been cultivated in some form or other by almost every human culture. At least on the surface, the appeal of this form is obvious. It presents a character with whom the audience identifies passing through the most frightening perils to achieve a triumph. Perhaps the most basic moral fantasy implicit in this type of story is that of victory over death, though there are also all kinds of subsidiary triumphs available depending upon the particular cultural materials employed: the triumph over injustice and threat of lawlessness in the western; the saving of the nation in the spy story; the overcoming of fear and defeat of the enemy in the combat story. While the specific characterization of the hero depends on the cultural motifs and themes that are embodied in any specific adventure formulas, there are in general two primary ways in which the hero can be characterized: as a superhero with exceptional strength or ability or as "one of us"--a figure marked, at least at the beginning of the story by flawed abilities and attitudes presumably shared by the audience.[6]

Seen against this basic hero formula, the construction and appeal of the comicbook superhero becomes obvious and apparent: being pure fantasy, it can cover all kinds of fantasies and triumphs enumerated above that evoke the mythical and span the range of themes from moral conflicts to combat stories. Furthermore, superheroes can likewise embody the two types of hero mentioned since they are usually endowed with a dual identity, a characterization which feeds the fantasy of the readers as the superhero is simultaneously a super-power while also being "one of us." Since the superhero text follows a formula so familiar to the readers, he/she is comfortable with it, relaxed and expectant. Superhero narrative is simple, held together by rapid action of one such character or a group of such characters. A mystery or dilemma is confronted with violence. Women are victims to be rescued. Heroes are tough and honourable. The law needs the hero's help. There are elaborate fight scenes whose winner is almost inevitable. Language is masculine. Plotting is precise and often predictable. Dialogue is short and punchy until the elaborate schemes of the villains need explaining. The conclusion is foreseeable. But despite the predictability of the stories, for some inexplicable reason, the "willing suspension of disbelief" in readers becomes inexhaustible. No matter how many times Superman, the Batman or Spider-Man achieve their triumphs, the next adventure again captivates, and reader suspense and involvement is always successfully manipulated. The play between predictability and innovation must account for some of the reading pleasure in the texts, and may lead one to the conclusion that the form is not as restrictive as is often thought.

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[6] John Cawelti, "Notes Towards a Typology of Literary Form," *Journal of Popular Culture* 10.1 (1976): 34.

Classic superhero narratives usually start with a disruption of the status quo and proceed to a discovery and eradication of the perpetrator of this disruption. Usually, the "establishment," namely, the police, and the judiciary, are the forces given credit for restoring order and stability, since the Superhero usually works with them. In classic superhero fiction, the disruption takes place in closed hierarchical communities, i.e., a "named" and identifiable, albeit imaginary, locale like Metropolis and Gotham City, is solved by the police and/or the superhero, who is generally also known as an establishment figure. The comicbook ends with the restoration of the old hierarchies. The superhero from this position could thus be seen as the last bastion of imperialism and outmoded class attitudes, sanitised violence, racism, sexism; he has too much respect for authority and an unhealthy tendency to see moral issues in absolute terms. Attributing to superhero narratives such conservative forms tends to imply rather negative reasons for the prominence or persistence of the genre among its readers. It would suggest that its readers are those attracted most by repetitive genres with conservative implications.

But this view is erroneous. It is based on a too scanty knowledge of the history of superhero comicbooks, and a far too rigid interpretation of the superhero genre, at least an outdated one in view especially of the more recent re-makes of many of the genre's characters and narratives. More and more, one can assert that the boundaries of the superhero genre, as with many other genres, are relatively fluid and do not necessarily have conservative implications since only an extraordinarily fertile and productive genre could have spread and caught the attention of readers worldwide, to last for so long. It is true that classic superhero texts tended to end with certainties. The villain is vanquished and the world is given stability again. The fact that the classic superhero figure tended in the past to be an establishment figure seems to imply that the forces of law and order were always good and unproblematic.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make a convincing argument that the outcome of the fights and hero adventures is often only secondary to the process of the unfolding of the disruption and its effects, the ensuing confrontation with the villains, and the development and expansion of the Superhero in each issue as more and more detail is added to his prowess or character with each new adventure. Even in a "classic plot" involving rather uncomplicated protagonists, there are at least two problematic elements: a) the depicted society is always in danger and its institutions for law enforcement are deficient, otherwise it would not need a superhero; and b) the restoration of peace and order is only temporary since recurring threats to a superhero's domain are intrinsic to the genre. In some cases, popular protagonists are even deliberately left to escape and their probable return is implied. In addition, many superheroes operate outside the law--the Submariner, the Hulk, Plastic Man, the Spirit, and countless others--helping powerless and worthy people to defend themselves against criminal and evil forces in areas where the official system of law and order has proven ineffective. The ending is moreover usually perfunctory, a necessary ending, but hardly equivalent to the complex fight scenes, the elaborate illustrations and interactions which preceded it, as well as to the flamboyant and memorable villains and rogues who litter superhero narratives (see Appendices 40 and 41).[7] In reaching the end, all sorts of unexpected things can happen just as all sorts of unexpected things are introduced. After all, crime involves the disruption of normalities (and actually, superheroes themselves are already a disruption of normalities) and superhero narratives are often the consequences of this disorder. While the plots are naturally geared towards the restoration of law, it is important to remember that it is also crucially about the breaking of the law, about the transgression of normal rules. Viewed from this perspective, the narratives become more interesting and take on more dimensions especially in relation to power and control. It is possible to perceive the genre as actually dealing with the transgression of the law, portraying the play between breaking and restoring law, or at the very least, ambivalence about law and order.[8] After all, if the police were efficient and sufficient in maintaining law and order, there would be no need for superheroes. The presence of superheroes to augment the establishment's capacity to uphold the law lends a slight distance between the hero figure and aspects of establishment.

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[7] **Appendices 40 and 41**: Superhero texts usually culminate in the restoration of law and order, but not before a grand display of chaos and destruction. In the process, many astonishing things can happen--a villain can endear him/herself to the fans, some favorite heroes can suffer sporadic setbacks. In this case, the unthinkable happens: for example, the "indestructible" Superman is defeated and dies. Dan Jurgens and Brett Breeding, *The Death of Superman*, October 1992.

[8] This is not very surprising since many people in the comicbook industry also felt their marginality in the printing and publishing industry. There were times when some even took pride in being "different" and sticking to working for comics which was not considered as a "real" job but simply a transition or entry point into more serious writing or illustrating jobs. A certain rebellious streak might also be due to the youth of many of the people who were working there (see interviews in Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics* (London: Virgin, 1991); also, H. Kurtzman, *My Life as a Cartoonist* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); and *The Comicbook Rebels (1986)*.

Moreover, the superheroes of today have evolved a great deal from the unabashed patriots of the 1940s and 1950s. Since the late 1970s, they have been shown routing out scientists, politicians, priests and other establishment figures who turn out to be in league with criminal elements. Finally, in usual adventure or hero stories, the trials are designed to see if the hero should really be a hero, if he is a match for the tasks set before him, if, for example, he can cheat and triumph over death. But superheroes were conceived to be intrinsically indestructible. This tacit agreement between artists and readers has a practical rationale as otherwise there would be no subsequent issues of that comicbook. That a superhero is assured of a continuous appearance in proportion to his popularity suggests that the narrative is not really geared towards an innovative ending other than his triumph, but that the innovation and variability is in actually presenting a variety of villains and in cooking up the "distortion" of the law (see Appendices 42 and 43).[9] The oirginality and creativity of the artists lie in making up and developing transgressions which provide the plot in each issue. This process also functions to rehash the origins and identity of the hero in order to give it new twists while maintaining some core ideas. Committed comicbook readers have come to expect this, and letters to the editor often applaud or rebuke these "innovative repetitions," implying that they accept some rules governing story-construction and superhero definitions.[10]

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[9] **Appendices 42 and 43**: Example of two villains--The Joker and The Penguin--who continue to delight comicbook fans and are able to attract, on their own merit, committed comicbook buyers. They are therefore guaranteed to survive whatever conflict they get involved in, or whatever trap or punishment is meant for them in any story.

Superhero Comicbooks and their Readership

Researching audiences is notoriously difficult and comicbook readership is no exception. Accurate, detailed historical data on circulation and readership in the comicbook industry are difficult to locate and verify. Circulation figures for individual comicbooks are not generally reported in any uniform, national manner. The two major comic companies, DC and Marvel, are reluctant to report most information pertaining to readership. A handful of distribution companies around the States do have such information but it is scattered by region and goes back only a few years. *Ayers Directory of Periodicals* and *Standard Rate and Data Service* have reported total monthly circulation for the major comic producers since the beginning of comics. But the varying mix of monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly issues and the failure of the majority of the hundreds of smaller presses to report to these services render this information imprecise.

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[10] In carrying out research on the comicbook audiences, Martin Barker shows some distinctions between committed, regular and casual comicbook readers and the correlating differences in their reactions to comicbooks. The more committed the readers, the "more likely they relate to the comics as to a *friend*." The implication of this is that they have a complicated social relationship to it. There is a kind of dialogue between comicbooks and readers in which the comic is seen as having a personality. See *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester and New York: 1989): 55-60.

In addition, circulation in comics is not a one-to-one indication of readership, because regular comic readers do not read just one comicbook a month or even just one comic title, such as the Batman, Superman or Spider-Man, a month. While there is at least one Batman fanzine, the vast majority of Batman readers, like comic readers generally, buy and read many different comic titles every week. Tastes and reading habits do vary and some readers concentrate on certain types of material; still, readers normally do not specialize to the point of reading only one comic title exclusively. Readers become involved in a number of characters or the titles of a specific company (such as DC, Marvel or First). Despite these difficulties, available circulation reports and sporadic readership studies culled from various sources can still generate a sense of overall readership.

Table I below provides a crude index specifically of superhero comicbook popularity from their inception in 1938 to 1989.

Table I. Estimated Monthly Circulation of Comicbooks (Millions)

1940	3.7
1944	28.7
1950	45.6
1952	59.8
1956	34.6
1961	33.7
1965	33.5
1971	30.4
1974	23.3
1979	18.5
1984	20.5
1989	20.3

From various sources.[11]

This table shows the slide comics have taken in the past thirty years. Monthly circulation grew through the 1940s reaching a peak of somewhere around 59 million in 1952, but then began an uneven downhill ride. These figures, of course, reveal neither the actual size of the audience nor the reason behind the changes in circulation. The history of the changing audience for superhero comicbooks is complex and fascinating.

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[11] *Ayers Directory of Periodicals, Standard Rate and Data Service*, N. B. "Capt. Marvel Returns to Lead Comic Revival," *Advertising Age* (Feb. 5, 1973): 39; N. B. "Comic Book Heroes Expand Marvel Business," *Advertising Age* (Dec. 17, 1979): 12; N. B. "Direct Sales Rescues Comics," *Advertising Age* (June 25, 1984): 110.

Short History of Superhero Comicbooks

The first publication to call itself a comicbook in the US came out in 1917 from the Saalfield Publishing Company and consisted of collected reprints from newspaper comic strips. Its size and format looked very much like the Sunday comic section of the newspapers, except that it was mostly black and white. It would not be until 1933 that the comicbook in the format we know it today appeared, produced by the Eastern Color Printing Company as giveaways for companies like Proctor and Gamble, Wheatena, Milk-O-Malt and Kinney Shoes.[12] Although now in full-color and magazine format, the comicbook was nevertheless still a compilation of popular Sunday comic strips, with neither original material nor an extended narrative featuring one character. By 1938, reprint comicbooks had become the norm. For the most part during these five years, early comic-book publishers were content to continue raiding the Sunday comic pages and had come up with neither a major original character nor concept.

But two teenagers would be responsible for changing the history and development of comicbooks in the US for all time. Despite refusals from major comic syndicates--the concept was a major departure from the idea of comicbook content--Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster managed to have an original character called Superman published in *Action Comics 1*. This comicbook laid the groundwork for the transformation and growth of the largest and most successful comicbook genre that would assure the future of comicbooks. *Action Comics 1* (dated June 1938) hit the newsstands in early Spring 1938. There were two succeeding issues but no immediate success was noticed by its publishers until the fourth issue when *Action Comics* sold about half a million copies while other titles would be selling approximately two hundred thousand copies per issue. DC's owner, Donenfeld, unsure of why the comicbook was doing so well, ordered a newsstand survey and found that the children were not asking for *Action Comics* but for the comicbook "with Superman."[13]

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[12] Mike Benton, *The Comic Book in America* (Texas: Taylor Publishing, 1993): 14.

> *Action* really stood out from the other dozen or so comic-book titles on the stands that month. Its cover pictured a muscular man wearing a brightly colored red-and-blue costume with a cape, lifting a car over his head as criminals flee in terror.[14]

Donenfeld had ordered Superman out of the cover after the first issue, worried that the character was too fantastic and ridiculous. But after the survey, he ordered him back on the covers and watched each succeeding issue sell out.

So unexpected and rapid was the success of Superman that it would be almost a year before he was joined by serious imitators. Although some superheroes would later be given more elaborate origins that may be traced back to Egyptian, Norse and Greek mythological beings who helped in the affairs of mortals, the roots of the early American comicbook superhero can be found in the popular fiction magazines of the early 1930s. Characters like the Shadow, Doc Savage, Dr. Mystic, and the Spider were all popular pulp-magazine characters with secret identities, costumes and super physical powers. Since many comicbook creators were also writers of the pulp adventure stories, and many comicbook publishers originally published pulp hero magazines, the similarities are not coincidences.[15]

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[13] Ron Goulart, *Ron Goulart's Great History of Comic Books* (Chicago: Contemporary, 1986): 34.

[14] Mike Benton, *op cit.*, 23.

The Golden Age of comicbooks is generally acknowledged to have begun in 1938, but it was hard to tell this by looking at the other comicbooks published that year. Most early comic-book publishers did not have a regular staff of artists and writers, and books were packaged by comic-book studio shops which littered Manhattan at this time. It took almost a year before the industry caught up to Superman's popularity, but when it did, superheroes multiplied by the hundreds and comicbook sales increased to millions of copies sold.[16] In 1939, there were fifty comic titles, by 1941 there were 168 and over eighty percent of these had superhero adventures in them.[17] Comicbooks surged in popularity during the war years despite the seeming inertia in the industry due to the war shortages in paper and labor which limited the growth of the industry. One publisher (Fawcett Publications) alone sold nearly forty-seven million comicbooks in 1943, more than double its sales of the previous year. In 1944, its most popular superhero title, *Captain Marvel Adventures*, sold over 14 million issues during a twelve-month period, almost three million more than the previous year.[18] Increasing numbser of American servicemen became comicbook readers to the extent that comics were reported to have outsold popular magazines such as *Life* and *Reader's Digest* at a rate of ten to one on army bases (1949).[19] Propelled by the rising sales, more and more superheroes were published while World War II initiated a big push for patriotic heroes. The war provided the superheroes with a new set of enemies and supplied a complete working rationale and the world view of a super-patriotic hero such as Captain America who epitomized American values during World War II (first appeared in *Captain America 1* (1941).[20] In the Summer of 1941, Nazi-bashing superheroes began in earnest--with propaganda and slogans included in the pages of the comicbooks.[21] The fact of the war also induced an element of realism into the comicbooks, and publishers adapted historical events or biographies of war heroes into comic-book stories. Fantasy, however, still ruled as may be seen in the spiralling powers granted to the superheroes, as well as in the visual renditions of their strength and fighting capabilities and the contraptions and gadgets used both by the superheroes and villains. To name a few, Captain Flash, Captain Atom, Doctor Solar and Dynamo provide a clue to the artists' and readers' fascination with scientific and futuristic curiosities. *Wonder Woman* (published by DC) broke the sex barrier in Summer of 1942, Marvel quickly followed with *Miss Fury* (Winter 1942) and Fawcett also added *Mary Marvel* (December 1945), a superheroine counterpart of Captain Marvel.[22] The Summer of 1943 brought the first parody of the superhero comics in the form of *Plastic Man* created by humour artist Jack Cole for *Police Comics*. As he stretched and slithered after criminals and transformed himself to all kinds of objects imaginable, Plastic Man was played strictly for laughs, and his adventures were refreshingly different from the deadly serious crimefighters of the day (see Appendix 45).[23]

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[15] Russell Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1970): 56.

[16] Stan Lee of Marvel Comics remembers the time when a variety of superheroes were being introduced almost every week as publishers sought to launch a superhero that would capture the readers' imagination like Superman, Batman or Captain Marvel did. "It seemed that unemployed costumed heroes were turning up almost daily at the Marvel office, and more loitered in the streets of Manhattan. . ." Les Daniels, ed. *Marvel Book of Superheroes* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1992): 112.

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[17] Judith Duke, *Children's Books and Magazines: A Market Study* (New York: Knowledge Industry Publications, 1979): 116.

[18] Jeff Rovin, *The Encyclopedia of Superheroes* (New York: Facts on File, 1985): 38-9.

[19] Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning, eds. *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Illinois: The Free Press, 1957): 187. The Armed Forces, in fact, used the comic format in training material distributed to the troops. One comic artist who worked within this educational medium for a long time was Will Eisner, creator of the Spirit.

[20] The first story is reproduced in Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (New York: Dial Press, 1965).

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[21] Les Daniels, *A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971): 56.

[22] Later, other female heroes entered the arena like *Black Cat* (Harvey: June 1946), *Doll Man* (Quality Comics: December 1951), *Supergirl* (Action Comics: May 1959), *Spider-Woman* (Marvel: April 1978), *She-Hulk* (Marvel: February 1980). However, the superhero field has been about ninety-percent male, which seems to be about the same demographics as the readership of most superhero comics. (Benton, *op cit.*, 176).

After the war, superhero comics soon lost two things: its servicemen readers and Nazi/Japanese villains. It is generally agreed that the golden age of comics and superhero comics in particular lasted from 1938 to 1949 after which the bulk of superhero comics folded due to falling readership. Only the Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman came through without a break in publication during the lean years of the early 1950s when interest had shifted to crime comics, western, and in particular, "horror and gore" comics. Excess of gore and horror, which initiated the censorious attacks of Dr. Wertham and the Congressional hearings on comics and juvenile delinquency (see Chapters One and Two), also led indirectly to the renaissance of superhero comics.[24] Very few comics publishers weathered the implementation of the Comics Code which excessively clamped down on crime and horror comics. DC and Marvel were two of the few which survived, and the revival of superheroes seemed safe within a Code which upheld authority figures and stipulated that law enforcement leaders should always be shown in a respectful and sympathetic manner. The year 1956 then sparked one of the most significant trends in comicbook history--the revival and updating of original comicbook superheroes for a new audience. A re-born and re-costumed Flash appeared in *Showcase 4*, October 1956 (the date usually regarded as the beginning of the so called Silver Age) and paved the way for the Green Lantern who returned in the *Showcase 22*, October 1959; a new heroine Supergirl also appeared, and then a whole superhero team in the shape of the Justice League of America who first appeared in *The Brave and the Bold* 28, March 1960. Norse Gods and legends were added as Thor first appeared in *Journey into Mystery* 83, August 1962. In March 1966, the comic was retitled *The Mighty Thor*. Increasingly more superhero revivals were carefully planned and published; the superheroes were featured in teams and groups as a chance to bring them all back at once, as well as to gauge from reader response which ones might be given their own issues or cover titles. Readers were writing *en masse* to publishers. Horror wedded to the superhero format materialized in the form of *The Incredible Hulk* who burst on the scene in *The Incredible Hulk* 1, May 1962. Golden Age characters like Captain America and the Submariner were brought back out of retirement as well. Marvel dominated the scene in the 1960s and early 1970s, its writers and artists created a wealth of exciting new titles that mixed protagonists more in tune with the mores of the period, and kept an eye for the visual and verbal ironies inherent in situating super-powered characters against a background that purported to represent the "real" world.

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[23] **Appendix 45**: One of the very first superhero parodies, *Plastic Man*.

[24] The so called Silver Age of superhero comics is agreed as having begun in 1956; there is no agreed terminal date but most would accept that it lasted until around 1967-70.

It was the Marvel line of this period which first began the expansion of comics into a teenage and college readership. DC, however, remained the leading publisher of superhero comics in terms of sales, benefitting from the enormous appeal of the 1960s Batman television series. Almost immediately after its January 1966 premiere, USA went "bat-crazy."[25] The show achieved tremendous ratings and was broadcast twice a week. This event had a great impact on comicbooks. Sales of all superhero comicbooks rose as a result of the show, and the Batman comicbooks in particular reached a very impressive circulation of close to nine hundred thousand copies, the largest circulation of any superhero comicbook since the 1950s.[26] Soon, the Batman was featured prominently in all DC comic-book covers, while both Marvel and DC rode on the wave of a new superhero popularity. By 1969, Batman and Superman titles made up nine of the ten best-selling comics in the United States.[27] Although the Second Heroic Age of comicbooks, the "Silver Age" is acknowledged to have begun in 1956, it is difficult to determine exactly when it ended. Nevertheless, 1967 might be a good year to mark the beginning of the end of the second superhero boom. Almost every comicbook published in 1967 had lower sales than the previous Bat-year. The Batman fell in circulation by nearly one hundred thousand copies and many other titles experienced a ten to twenty percent drop in sales.

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[25] *Batman*, a video released by Panavision 1989.

[26] Patrick Parsons, "Batman and His Audience," in Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (eds). *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media* (New York and London: Routledge: 1991): 66-89.

[27] Benton, *op cit.*, 177.

The next interesting landmark in superhero comics would be 1971 when *Spider-Man* (issues 95 to 97) defied the Comics Code Authority by featuring an anti-drug story, reflecting the new social consciousness of the young writers and artists working on the books. Because of Code prohibitions against any protrayal of drug use, this *Spider-Man* issue had to be distributed without the seal of approval from the Comics Code Authority. However, as a result of the industry's desire to present anti-drug messages, the Comics Code reviewed its 1954 standards and modified them so that such topics could be treated. At the same time, the Code relaxed the prohibition against the use of horror in comics, the treatment of law violations, and so on. Before 1971, Spider-Man also introduced another innovation for the superhero genre and despite the fact that he was not originally intended to star in a series, he became the epitome of the radical innovations that characterized the Marvel Age (1961-70).[28]

> "Can they be *right*? Am I really some sort of crack-pot, wasting my time seeking fame and glory? Am I more interested in the adventure of being *Spider-Man* than I am in helping people??? Why do I do it? Why don't I give up? And yet, I *can't*! I must have been given this great power for a *reason*! No matter how difficult it is, I *must* remain *Spider-Man*! I pray that some day the world will understand!" [29]

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[28] Daniels, *op cit.*, 95.

[29] Stan Lee, *The Amazing Spider-Man #4* (September 1963): n. p. For another example of Peter Parker pondering the fate of Spider-Man, see also **Appendix 44**.

Marvel editor Stan Lee used Spider-Man to challenge the very concept of the superhero. Spider-Man was neurotic, compulsive and profoundly skeptical about the whole idea of becoming a costumed savior. He was constantly struggling with himself while others continued their valiant fights against whichever villain was currently wreaking havoc in their spheres, or had problems with their alter egos like Thor or the Hulk.

By the 1980s, the Comics Code which once was powerful enough to close down over fifty percent of comicbook publishers, had become a spent force. Both Marvel and DC had started to advertise insouciantly many of their comics as "Suggested for Mature Readers," offering comicbooks dealing explicitly with violence and sexuality. Such confidence in the labelling bespoke the strength of their adult readership. In the mid-1980s, DC had reasserted itself as the leading comicbook publisher by means of a shrewd and imaginative revamping of classic titles, launching a new line of comics (DC Vertigo) specifically for adults, and promoting bold and innovative work both in the superhero genre and in the linked genres of fantasy and horror with titles such as *Hellblazer, Watchmen, Sandman, Moonshadows, Shadowfall,* among others. The current crowd of superheroes are much more mortal and complex, especially in their psychological constitution.

The Batman and Superman still remain the chief superhero characters who are the most widely recognized. This time they are popular not only among children but with a variety of audiences who have grown up and embraced the superhero genre through a collage of different media manifestations during a fifty year history. Any attempt to define the limits of the superhero genre requires an exploration of the heroes themselves, in their similarities as in their differences, but especially of the two leading examples. The Batman and Superman, together with many other superheroes, have come a long way from being related to the mystery men of the 1930s and 1940s pulp fiction, as well as from being patriotic do-gooders of the war years. Although almost all of the original superhero concepts were developed between 1938 and 1943, the superheroes have definitely grown up, and so has the genre and its readers.

Characteristic Features of Superheroes

The concept of a character with superhuman strength and invulnerability caught the fancy of a nation as Superman's arrival created a whole new genre out of a very coarse set of materials. Today, many aspects of the first Superman and its narrative approach have the appearance of a cliché. Indeed, much of what would become central to the superhero genre was already established in the thirteen pages of the first Superman issue. The first issue introduces readers to a distant, dying planet and explains that a "scientist" placed his infant son in a spaceship, launching it towards Earth. The "sleeping babe" is discovered and delivered to an orphanage (Clark Kent's parents are a later addition to the mythology). On reaching maturity, the young man discovers he has considerable powers, (though modest compared to the god-like capabilities that he would later acquire in his fifty-year career). He decides to dedicate his strength to the service of mankind, and becomes Superman--"Champion of the oppressed, this physical marvel who has sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need." All these facts were contained in just the first page (see Appendix 46). The next five pages relate how Superman prevents an innocent woman from going to the electric chair, how Clark gets an assignment from the (yet unnamed) editor of the *Daily Star* (later to be renamed *Daily Planet*) and assigned to cover the feats of Superman, and how Superman intervenes in a wife-beating scene.

Then, as Clark, he meets his colleague Lois Lane who agrees to a date to "give him a break, for a change." It was a disastrous date, interrupted by a challenge to fight from a "hunk" called Matson who disdains Clark's pacifist attitudes, and later bundles Lois Lane into his car as she angrily leaves the club by herself. The car's getaway was blocked by the imposing figure of Superman who tips both Lois and the roughnecks out of the car, and then trashes the vehicle in a panel which also provides the subject matter for the first *Action Comic*'s famous car-throwing cover. Clark's problem, in that his second identity steals the affections of Lois, starts here; the very next day, Lois treats him more cooly than ever. Meanwhile, Clark is assigned to stir up news for the *Star's* front page and is told to go to the small South American republic of San Monte. But instead, as Superman, he takes the train to Washington to investigate corruption in the US Senate.

The actions and motifs in this first issue reveal the influence of usual hero-adventure narratives, as well as establishing much of what will be staple to the superhero genre. Some of the features that would be repeated countless times in other superhero stories could be listed as follows: a) aberrant or mysterious origins, b) lost parents, c) man-god traits, d) a costumed, secret identity, e) difficulties with personal and emotional relationships, f) great concern for justice, and g) use of superpower in politics. Similar to Superman being forced to leave Krypton, the usual superhero adventure begins with someone from whom something important has been taken away--home and/or family, a loved one who dies, normal human constitution because of an accident, the sense of security is threatened, the feeling of complacency is lost because of the awareness of a "difference," and so on. In the usual hero-adventure story, the hero then undertakes a mission to recover what has been lost, to avenge a wrong, to discover some life-giving elixir or all of these together, usually fulfilling a cycle of departure and return.

For the true superhero, this cycle is rendered impossible by the nature of their "repetitive narratives," not to mention commercial demands, which dictate that they should battle again and again and thus bar any return to a former or calm existence. The superhero cycle is therefore simply comprised of discovering the cause of disorder and defeating the transgressor, although even the ensuing peace and calm is very often illusory, contradicted by an intrusion from the comicbook editor who advertises the next issue(s), directing the readers to upcoming battles, hinting at narrative twists, and cancelling any pretense of a complete cycle.

Another basic motif of hero adventures utilized in this genre is the departure from one condition, usually psychological immaturity or physical dependency, in order to achieve not only individual but communal success. As in the folktale world, a superhero's coming into his inheritance or the acceptance of his "difference" and consequent role in society may be seen as a symbol of coming to a condition of moral autonomy. One favourite technique in obliging superheroes to confront autonomy is the loss of parents or a loved one--the Batman, a.k.a. Bruce Wayne, is haunted by the murder of his parents; Superman hails from a dying planet and is raised by human foster parents; Spider-Man's closest relative is his Aunt Mary who is also murdered; Wonder Woman starts as a lifeless sculpture created by her mother and she later renounces her immortality to remain in this man's world; the Submariner lost both his parents in a clash between humans and the inhabitants of Atlantis.

Although heroes in the folktale and comicbook worlds may be said to be already earmarked for great deeds, many superheroes are different from folktale heroes in that their status is not gained by undergoing trials and tasks; most of them start out as a result of freak accidents (Spider-Man, Captain America, Dr. Manhattan, the Fantastic Four, the Hulk) or they are born somewhere else which gives them special powers on Earth (Superman, Wonder Woman, Mighty Thor, Iron Man, Submariner). Through no conscious desire of theirs, they find themselves thrown into an advantageous or extra-ordinary position. The possible exception is the Batman who decides to transform himself physically and mentally, driven by vengeance and the memory of his parents' murder. In dedicating over twenty years of his life to changing his physical and intellectual prowess, the Batman achieves what other superheroes already possess: some special powers that are either physical, magical, attributable to a weapon or device, or, most frequently, a combination of the above.

With the special powers, superheroes usually have the desire to use these for the common good, as well as the motivation to do good deeds because of high moral values. As mentioned above, the implicit high moral of these avenger-type heroes provides a critique of the customary institutions of law and order in society, and instead, expresses a desire for a fiercer and purer authority that would arise to punish evil, eluding the delays and corruption of constitutional law. To remain unknown to both crooks and the police, a superhero dons a costume while fighting crime, and assumes another identity or an alter ego for everyday life for reasons of privacy and protection. However, having to assume dual identities usually means entering into a series of compromises, learning to be selectively deaf and blind to inconvenient realities. Quite often, these involve problems for the hero with regards to his emotional relationships and love interests. Somehow, there is a tendency among the women to fall for the costumed identity while not recognizing its alter ego even if they generally spend more time with the un-costumed personality because of their working circumstances. Costumes perform an interesting function in both defining and camouflaging a superhero, not only visually but in their bearing and outlook as well. Bruce Wayne's suave, playboy personality effectively covers his nocturnal activities as the Batman, Clark Kent's shyness and fumbling speech hide Superman's invincibility, Diana Prince's eyeglasses and dowdy clothes cover Wonder Woman's curves and cunning, Dr. Blake's lame leg distracts from Thor's god-like perfection, and the list goes on. There is no mistaking when each is functioning under their superhero or human capacity, and the most immediate sign to this is their costume. It would be no exaggeration to say that perhaps the most distinguishing trait of the comicbook superhero is his costume.

Costumes

From its inception, colour has been a chief selling point of comics.[30] By 1939, comicbooks were a full-colour medium and creators borrowed the colorful costumes of circus performers and acrobats to dress their heroes and make striking covers to attract buyers (which at that time were mostly children).[31] Moreover, because of the acrobatic stances of the heroes, it was convenient to draw them in tights which did not encumber the emphasis on the muscles and the anatomy, in general; capes added grandeur to the visual lines as the heroes dangled in mid-air or swooped upwards or poised for a fight.[32] The costume also served another important purpose. It allowed for easy identification of the characters especially considering the graphic quality of early comics. In the poorly drawn and printed pages of pre-war comics, for example, costumes distinguished a superhero from other characters or other superheroes. As more and more superheroes were introduced, costumes became a crucial sign of super-heroism that marked out heroes (and villains) from by-standers and other characters who did not wear costumes. In this sense, costume functions as a uniform, binding together all super-beings and costumed characters in contrast to the non-costumed ordinary world. The appearance of a costumed character in a story will generate a specific set of expectations--it signals, for example, that the figure is now operating in his superhero identity and at any moment will be involved in violent conflict with villains. Costumes also became increasingly a sign to indicate an individual hero's character and powers. The colors, shapes, and ornaments in the costumes, as well as other implements, signal features essential to the hero's identity, powers, and capabilities--Thor's hammer, Wonder Woman's lasso, bracelets and tiara, Captain America's shield, Wolverine's steel claws, Silver Surfer's board, and so on.[33]

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[30] In fact, the comics spawned the term "yellow journalism." The *Yellow Kid* (1896) by Richard Outcault is generally acknowledged to have been the first newspaper comic strip. It also marked a breakthrough in printing techniques because of its use of the color yellow which made full-colour reproductions possible in newspapers for the first time. This strip became a major success, boosted the circulation figures of the *New York Journal*, and started a highly competitive campaign between two legendary magnates of the New York Press--Hearst and Pulitzer--for the ownership of the "Yellow Kid," as well as other comic strips which were regularly being featured in the comic supplement pages. The unscrupulous piracy of comic artists between New York's leading newspapers during this time, in particular for the Yellow Kid, is generally aknowledged as giving rise ot the term "yellow journalism."

[31] Alan Aldridge and George Perry, *The Penguin Book of Comics* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971): 27. Appendix 47: There were also some artists who played with the convention of portraying costumed superheroes, foremost of which is Jim Steranko who hails from the Underground comix movement.

[32] Interview with Marvel editor, Stan Lee in Les Daniels, ed. *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics.* (London: Virgin, 1991): 112.

Changes in costumes have also been used within the gambit of character development as in *The Wasp* who brings a different kind of rhetoric to her varied disguises. Her repeated costume changes are purely for the sake of appearances, aimed to emphasize her femininity and serve to blur the boundaries between the superheroine and her alter ego, Janet Van Dyne, who is a socialite and fashion designer. Due to the constant variation of her attires, however, The Wasp lacked the immediacy of visual identification and was established more through contextual elements. Wonder Woman's characterization also changed as her ornaments were discarded: her powers and way of thinking had to be re-defined due to the ensuing loss of some abilities dependent on her tiara and bracelets, and part of her origin-stories had to be re-written since these ornaments were special gifts from Aphrodite, the main goddess of the Amazon's Paradise Land (see Appendix 48).[34] A member of *The Avengers*, Henry Pym became variously known in costume as the Ant-man, Giant Man and Yellow Jacket as he underwent costume changes in an effort to refine his own powers and superpowered identity. Ultimately, Pym's problem centred on justifying his place in a super-team full of far more powerful and more charismatic super-characters (Thor, Iron Man, Captain America, see Appendix 49). Pym's failure to find any definitive version of his costume placed him firmly in the ranks of secondary or back-up characters. He was never featured in his own own comic-book and was only viable as part of a superhero group, The Avengers.

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[33] One of the more interesting of 1940s comicbook characters was *The Spirit* by Will Eisner, created exclusively for a newspaper syndicate that wanted a superhero for its Sunday comic pages. *The Spirit* had a mask and dual identity but no superpowers. It is generally hailed in the comics scene (although not so popularly known among the general public) as one of the best written and illustrated comicbooks, known for its atmospheric stories, grotesque characters, gentle sense of humour, as well as satire and parody. *The Spirit* made its debut as a weekly Sunday comic book that was distributed for twelve years. It bridged the gap between comic strips and comic books by appearing in a coverless 16-page comic book that circulated with the Sunday funnies in newspapers.

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[34] **Appendix 48**: Wonder Woman's bracelets were crucial to her becoming *the* Wonder Woman, and have protected her ever since from bullets, knives, and other weapons of her enemies. However, the bracelets can also be used as manacles for binding the heroine. Originally fastened on the wrists of the Amazons as signs of captivity *(Wonder Woman #3)*, the bracelets later became known as "bracelets of loving submission" to Aphrodite. Various critics (refer to Coulson, Robbins, and Yronwode in the Bibliography section) have cited the fixation on bondage and submission
in Wonder Woman texts. The bracelets were not discarded until late 1987.

The discourse implicit in superhero costumes is far from being an arbitrary set of conventions so much so that the popular heroes are recognizable even just in their silhouettes or in more abstract renditions, and are identifiable through color and/or shape combinations. To change the costume of solid superheroes like Captain America or the Batman would mean redefining a precise iconographic configuration. Captain America who burst forth on the comics scene in 1941 in a series of patriotic adventures against the Nazis, became Marvel's most popular superhero during the 1940s because he captured the essence of a World War II patriotic fighting hero.

> "Captain America was very much a reflection of his time. He was patriotic when the country was patriotic. He was willing to fight for his country when his country was getting ready to get into a horrible war. We saw him as a political statement fleshed out to be an active force (Joe Simon, co-creator of Captain America).[35]

Inconceivable outside the circumstances which fashioned him, Captain America was suitably clad in the colors and shapes found in the US flag (see Appendix 50). The Batman's dark, bat-like costume is one utterance within the costume code that elegantly articulates the proper range of associations they were meant for: night, fear, the supernatural. It also suggests Batman's mode of operation: stealth, concealment, surprise (see Appendix 51).

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[35] Interview with Joe Simon in Les Daniels, *op cit.*, 72.

Many texts about various superheroes have explored the contrast between the costume and the person behind it, the problems in dealing with split personalities, and the burden that the heroic identity places on them.[36] The man inside the costume is repeatedly called upon to earn his right to the powers which the costume confers on him. The costume somehow becomes a source of power, to wear the costume is to *become* the superhero or the super villain. In fact, the costume is very closely linked to the over-all make up of the hero so that a fraudulent use of the costume usually ends adversely for the usurper. In *Batman: Prey* (1992) a psychiatrist who is obsessed with Batman dons a bat-costume very similar to that of the hero in order to get to "know" Batman better (see Appendix 52).[37] He also deludes himself, no matter how slightly, that he gains some powers of the Batman when he wears the costume. In *The Reign of the Supermen*, despite all signs pointing to the contrary, Lois Lane doubts the claim of the Last Son of Krypton to be the real Superman (three other "Supermen" are making the same claim) because "Superman never hid his face behind glasses! And he didn't wear black like an executioner!"[38]

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[36] In Chapter Two of Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (London: Batsford, 1992), Reynolds provides a prime example of a superhero contemplating the burdens and demands of heroism on the hero's alter ego, in his close analysis of a page from *Iron Man 108*. In the last two panels, Tony Stark (Iron Man) thinks to himself: "Why should Joe and Jane America care who - or **what** - is inside this metal suit as long as **Iron Man** gets the job done?. . .As long as I risk my life to bring them **Peace of Mind**?. . .Peace that I, myself, have never **known**!"

[37] **Appendix 52:** A psychiatrist dons a bat-costume in order to "know" the Batman better. Doug Moench, Paul Gulacy and Terry Austin. *Batman: Prey* (New York: DC Comics, 1992). Originally published in single magazine form as *Legends of the Dark Knight*, No. 11-15 (1990-91).

The role of costume as narrative device is a state of affairs which the writer and artist can work with or against, but which cannot be left wholly out of account. Costumes must be recognizable and make a formal statement about the hero's personality and character development. Even more recent texts, such as *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* which make playful intertextual allusions to other superhero comics do not by and large break the rules of the costume system of signification.[39] Rather, they play a knowing set of variations with the audience's established pattern of responses, based on a shared knowledge of the rules of costume, and what might be said to constitute a violation of these rules.

> (in *Watchmen*) the deconstruction of costumed superhero values is pursued as part of the deconstruction of the costumes themselves. Dr. Manhattan, omnipotent super-being, spends his 25 year career shedding piece by piece the all-enveloping costume provided for him by the US government. At the end of the book, he chooses to go naked. And the semiotic function of superhero costume can be unpicked in more ways than one. Superhero costumes are either sexless, denying the humanity of the hero within, or garments of great erotic significance. Nite Owl reveals the fetishism implicit in the design of most superhero

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[38] Roger Stern, Jackson Guice and Denis Rodier. *The Last Son of Krypton is Back (Born Again), Superman* 687 (New York: DC Comics, 1993).

[39] Frank Miller. *The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986). Originally published in magazine form as *The Dark Knight Returns, The Dark Knight Triumphant, Hunt the Dark Knight, The Dark Knight Falls,*all from DC Comics, 1986. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: Warner Books, 1987). Originally published in twelve issues in magazine form by DC Comics, 1986-1987.

> costumes, during his exceptionally well-realized first sexual encounter with Laurie Juszpeczyk, the Silk Spectre (see Appendix 53)[40]

The sexual encounter between Nite Owl and Silk Spectre reveals a subtext present since the very first superhero story. Superman's prowess in defeating Butch Matson is only the earliest of many examples of the sudden virility and sex-appeal gained when a character changes into a "costume." As mentioned earlier, women always prefer the character with the costume on rather than the alter ego. It seems that donning the costume is more than just a sign of the inner change from ordinariness to a super man. A costume also endows some sexual power and attraction. In this regard, one of the most interesting parts in the use of comicbook costumes may be seen in its relation to female heroines.

The most well-known superheroine is Wonder Woman whose iconography of whips and chains became the jumping off point for the sub-genre of "Good Girl" art where superheroines were as exciting for their scantily clad appearance and alluring poses as for their villain-bashing exploits. Comicbooks were generally written for boys, although some girls also read them. In comicbooks where characters are drawn according to a highly coloured and simplified scheme, women were in general more loosely imagined than men and less invigorating to identify with. There were few major roles for women within the pages of such magazines. Most females are "girlfriends" of the hero and serve two functions: trying to learn the hero's identity and always getting into trouble so that the hero has someone to save. Or, they wear skimpy outfits, thus producing what is termed as "good girl art" in the comicbook community (see Appendices 54 to 56):[41]

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[40] Reynolds, *op cit.*, 33. **Appendix 53:** The first sexual encounter between Nite Owl and the Silk Spectre fails but this time it succeeds, enhanced by the costumes and the "other" identity that comes with their disguises (*Watchmen, op cit.*, 28.)

> Good Girl superheroines of the 1940s operated in the wider context of the Vargas pin-up girls, the Just Jane cartoons and sweethearts of the forces such as Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth. Good Girl art takes the signs of pornographic discourse (whips, chains, spiked heels, beautiful but blank faces) and integrates them into the context of non-pornographic story structures. In this way, the sign of pornography (never explicitly delivered) comes to stand in for an entire pornographic sub-text, a series of blanks which readers remain free to fill in for themselves. And it is within the neo-pornographic texts of Good Girl art that the distinctions between costumed heroes and villains can first be seen to break down, a change that in turn influenced mainstream superhero comics.[42]

The "girlfriends" of the superheroes are always portrayed as well-behaved, alert and intelligent. Nevertheless, they are also marked by extreme vulnerability to harm and hopeless infatuation. This theme was already present in the first issue of *Superman*, and Lois's obsession with the superhero continues today. And although she has lived just as long as Superman, she has never achieved equal star status in comicbooks.[43] The pages of comicbooks abound with unflattering clichés about women's powerlessness and isolation which in turn provides a reason for the superhero to come to their aid.

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[41] **Appendices 54, 55 and 56**: *Red Sonja* (Marvel Comics 1978) and *Rulah* (Zoot Comics 1948) grace their respective comicbook covers in skimpy outfits, typical of "good girl art" which started as early as the mid 1940s. The trend of illustrating women in provocative outfits and postures has not changed, as may be seen in one of the comicbook heroines currently popular among adolescent boys, *Samuree* (Continuity Comics 1991).

[42] Juanita Coulson, "Of (Super)Human Bondage," in Don Thompson, ed. *The Comic Book Book* (New York: Arlington House, 1973): 230.

This common theme crosses over to both heroines and female villains, blurring the boundaries between them. There are many female antagonists who are shown to be victims of their circumstances as women, and later atone and change over to employing their superpowers at the service of justice. Catwoman started as a well-known Batman adversary, in the league of the Joker and Penguin, even conniving with the Batman's enduring foes. She is revealed to have been a streetwalker who turned to crime partly to help those in the same plight and others oppressed by poverty. Although she still works outside the law and is often wanted by the police, she now leans more and more towards being a superheroine than a villain (see Appendix 57).[44] Spider-Woman, like many other superheroines, started outside the law as Hydra, an agent for an unknown spy organization, under threat of death. As her powers increased, she became a superheroine who was featured in her own comicbook. Many of Wonder Woman's female enemies turn out to be under hypnosis or under somebody else's power, usually that of a male scientist. A featured villainess who appeared in a series of Wonder Woman comicbooks, Baroness Von Gutenberg, was only acting for the Nazis because they kidnapped her daughter. The Baroness had to be helped out of this hostage situation and thereafter became Wonder Woman's ally. Red Sonja enjoyed super-powers because she hailed from the majestic kingdom of Hyrkania which she was forced to flee after her parents were slain and she spurned the advances of the pillagers' king and slew him.[45]

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[43] There is a weekly television show which began in late 1993 entitled "Lois and Clark" which now features Lois Lane and Clark Kent/Superman in almost equal billing.

[44] **Appendix 57**: Much like other superheroines, Catwoman admits to needing male assistance from time to time. In view of the female physique, superheroines require male assistance, and are shown being saved and served by men in ways male superheroes never are (Jo Duffy, Jim Balent and Bob Smith, *Knightsend: Catwoman 13*. DC Comics, 1994).

Especially in the early years of comicbooks, it seem that women could not be portrayed as extremely evil as some male villains were. There are hardly any female antagonists who remain as vile and unscrupulous throughout their comicbook career as some well-known male villains. Although by the 1950s, many sultry and hard-hearted female villains were created in reaction to the honorable and competent women of earlier comicbooks and strips, there was neither conspicuous menace in their intentions nor gruesome violence in their adventures and fight scenes. During the years from the 1950s to the early 1960s, there were many heroines who adopted the aggressive, face-smashing attitudes of their male predecessors--instead of a man bursting through the door and executing an impressive jumpkick to his adversary, it was a woman. But in spite of some sympathetic, independent heroines and some socially satisfying plots, their acceptance of the individualistic and machismo codes of violence are highly problematic. Most of these heroines were conceived by men, drawn mostly by men, and targetted for male adolescents, which developed the "good girl art" mentioned above. It should have been problematic to replace the tough, aggressive superhero with a female equivalent and include little or no criticism of violence. Nevertheless, the comicbook industry was so dominated by men for so long and so little attention was paid to the polysemy of comicbook texts that these evaluations did not develop. No women heroine, for example, questioned or parodied the type of individualism and violence which normally sustain such superhero texts, as created by Stan Lee with Spider-Man. Most of the difference remained in the visual level; the code, message and way of thinking were clearly male and simply transposed into the mouths and minds of heroines.

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[45] Red Sonja's tale is reminiscent of the Brunhilde motif: she retains her powers only so long as she remains a virgin, and she can only yield to a man who can beat her in fair combat.

The identity of comicbook superheroines is not so clearly fleshed out and, with the exception of Wonder Woman, very few endure and become popular. The "reduction" of female protagonists may also be seen in the usual underestimation of their capabilities by both policemen and crooks. The intervention of female heroines seldom seems to evoke the deference from lawmen or terror from criminals (regardless how reluctantly) that herald the arrival of male superheroes in critical situations. Similarly, a female antagonist has yet to create a distinct and memorable response of fear or loathing among the superheroes the way the Joker has, or Lex Luthor, or even J. Jonah Jameson.

By extension, women in general have been relegated to minor roles in superhero texts, and presented in ways that give priority to men and the idea of adventure; women have their assigned places in the men's lives and are made secondary to what passes between a man and other men. Women provide motivations for the men's great deeds, but superhero texts eschew the idea of intimate relations with women.

It is typical of many superhero stories, in so far as the narrative closure in each book goes, that the heroes reject or never actually win the love of the woman they are after. The Batman/Bruce Wayne finds himself attracted to perceptive women who understand the concept of "Batman" and find the vigilante interesting and honorable. These are, however, usually the same women who remain aloof to, or even slightly disdainful of, Bruce Wayne's playboy lifestyle. At the same time, Bruce Wayne harbors some hesitation in pursuing such attractions, to keep up with his projected cavalier treatment of women, and more importantly, for fear that his well-kept secret identity will be revealed. Often, love and intimacy demand a choice or conflict between their super-powers or possessing the woman they really love, as is the case also with Superman, the Hulk, the Mighty Thor, to name a few. To enjoy intimacy would entail disclosure of their super-identity which would open the superheroes to some vulnerability, and somehow transfer power and control over to the women. This fear and hesistancy spring in part from the fact that the women do not recognize or value the heroes' alter egos. Often, in fact, the women are critical, even dismissive, of these alter egos while consumed with love and curiosity for their super-personality.

Regardless of how intelligent and positive these women are portrayed, they remain in the background and do not exist outside of their relation to the superhero. The most popular among them, Lois Lane, was even featured for some time in a comicbook of her own. Nevertheless, she still epitomizes the secondary role of women in superhero texts who, in a typical piece of ideological double talk, are taught to admire and desire that which rejects them:

> (Lois Lane is) hopelessly in love with the Man of Steel, while at the same time haughtily spurning the sheepish advances of Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent. The Freudian implications of this weird menage-a-trois were never fully realized by the authors, but this story device projects a neurotic parable: while Superman was deemed too good for any woman, no woman would consider Clark good enough for her. Thus, in both of his impersonations, (as super-hero and super-schlemiel) , Superman-Clark Kent could find no sexual fulfillment (and neither could Lois).[46]

There is a subtle rejection of women, presented as a necessary element of the plot in most superhero texts. Women are usually reduced to being perceived as threats to male independence and masculinity. Sentiment among superheroes is presented as a weakness that would detract from the masculine business of adventure and power. Women's concerns and their desire for intimacy, with its threat to masculine independence, are the repressed aspects of masculinity that must thus suffer reiterated narrative rejection. The hero's possession of such "weakness," however, and the constant need to conquer or deal with it, is naturalized as part of the masculine problem. The subsequent repetitive rejection of the woman is the narrative exscription of the feminine that leads to an ideology of masculinity which demands a rejection of the feminine in order to foster male bonding. In prioritizing male relationships, no matter how antagonistic, by granting them narrative centrality, and portraying adventure and the resolution of crime and chaos primarily as male business, the superheroes (and supervillains) sustain a defined relationship protected from the threat of female intimacy. Their bond is goal-oriented and not relationship-oriented; it depends more on action than on feeling. Relationships are there to serve a purpose, mostly to show the need to depend and care for others as externalised onto a goal and concrete actions, less as an internalized and basic need of the male. In issue after issue, the superheroes' concern for friends or family, their hometown, or planet Earth and its inhabitants propel them to confront almost anything, always at the risk of their lives. These external causes are deemed more worthy than true love and intimacy, enough to convince heroes to hold on to their identities and/or power which they risk losing if they succumb to the latter. However, the avoidance of intimacy places the superhero in a terrible isolation, and may present him as insensitive and less human--hence the need for higher action-oriented goals and legitimized, non-threatening male bonding which can be validly prioritized over the continuous agony of repeatedly unfulfilled relationships while not totally excluding the latter.

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[46] Maurice Horn, *Women in the Comics* (New York and London: Chelsea House Publishers, 1977): 91.

Perhaps the exscription of women and the vague stance on intimacy in superhero texts is not as offensive when viewed in relation to the comicbooks' main audience--adolescent boys--with their burgeoning and ambiguous concept of dealing with the female and the feminine. It is not too difficult to understand why excessive signs of masculinity in an exaggerated and compensatory display would appeal to adolescent boys who are as yet denied the social means to exercise the power that society imparts as the prerequisite of their masculinity. Hero figures are popular among those whose bodies are not yet strong enough to grant them the power that they desire and which is conceived to be a sign of masculinity. For the same reason, advertisements for bodybuilding gadgets litter the comic pages, as well as ads for bicycles, toy cars and guns, and devices for home experiments. All of these are ways in which adolescent boys can vicariously access the strength of superheroes which is frequently presented as extended by cars, guns, machinery, and technical know-how. For some heroes, these extensions of physical strength are even essential to their identity, for example, Iron Man, Silver Surfer, and Night Wing; and for some, extensive knowledge of advanced technology is essential, for example, Batman, Dr. Manhattan, Ozymandias, and Adam Strange, among others. In general, there is a close link between strength and control, privilege and virtue, power and humanity. All superheroes are in someway or another privileged by their super-status. Nonetheless, assiduous control of their emotions is a condition, as well as selective use of their might only for the benefit of mankind; otherwise, there would be nothing to differentiate them from super-villains who are unscrupulously greedy and driven by their pursuit of power to madness.

In scrutinizing the "identity" of a superhero, it is evident that masculinity is a principal concept in defining and distinguishing an enduring hero. Masculinity, however, is a social concept that goes beyond being muscular and excelling in brute strength. Being male and masculine manifests itself more in how effectively a superhero uses mind and/or muscle to resolve various power struggles over control and order, thereby displaying authority and self-sufficiency, and gaining public recognition for these achievements. Superheroes share three traits: scruples, extra-ordinary strength, and financial self-sufficiency. They are each endowed also with varied abilities that allow them to excel and assume authority as a masculine force: physical or mechanical power, planning and leadership, cunning and advanced or specialised knowledge, and so on--a variety of powers which provide readers with multiple entry points for their identification with a hero. The variety equally allows different ways of prioritizing the concepts and abilities that constitute masculinity for adolescents, who, relative to the social concept of being "male," are as yet ambiguously situated in society.

Identity and Masculinity

Although all superheroes have developed throughout their comicbook careers, there are defining qualities tacitly agreed upon by both comics creators and consumers that constitute a superhero. Most of these have been established in the first issue of Superman, who remains the norm against which other superheroes are measured. The "true" identity of Superman may be scrutinized in a long series featuring his (formerly unthinkable) death, a narrative sustained in weekly issues which lasted almost a year.[47] It started with *The Death of Superman* which was first published in magazine form in February 1992, and extended to two other successive series--*Funeral for a Friend, The Reign of the Supermen*, ending with *Superman: Back for Good* issued in October 1993. As Superman became increasingly powerful throughout the years, his invincibility had taxed the encounters with the only element known earlier to be able to defeat him, Krypton: for his demise, therefore, Doomsday had to be invented. Doomsday, portrayed as incredibly strong, possesses one of the most compelling, shrouded-in-mystery origins of any comics character yet and this kept the fan letters pouring into the DC editorial office. Introduced as pummeling his way out of a vault buried 100 feet underground in the middle of nowhere, Doomsday's genesis was intentionally kept rather vague and not necessarily evil. He was well-loved by fans, especially as he pushed the stories to become grittier and much more graphic, ultimately ending in the defeat and death of Superman.

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[47] As comicbooks increasingly blurred the gap between the fantastic superheroes and the current realities of modern society, death among superheroes became an interesting theme beginning with the 1970s. Marvel initiated a trend by publishing--successfully--the death of Captain Marvel from cancer. Since then, the immortality of a superhero was not a certainty anymore.

Although surprised and saddened by the outcome, many of the fans indicated in their letters that Superman warranted such an end--by a worthy villain like Doomsday rather than through an inanimate substance, Krypton.[48] Some typical fan mail read:

> Dear Metropolis Mailbag:
>
> When America heard that Superman was going to die, fans crawled out of the woodwork to cry out in disbelief and outrage. They asked "why?" They asked "how?" The concept was beyond them.
>
> When I heard of Superman's impending death, however, I understood. Good people die: Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, kings, queens, popes, my grandfathers, my grandmothers. All of them good people. All of them have now passed on.

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[48] Many fans were resigned to the pre-ordained death of Superman and were also certain that he would be revived. Even during the Doomsday stampede, some were already writing in their suppositions and theories on how the editors would restore him. The coming of the series *Reign of the Supermen* shifted the readers' attention to guessing who the "real" Superman was among the four or five claiming to be him.

> Why is Superman going to die? Because, although it is not a desirable ending, death is a natural process. It is inevitable for everyone. Some ask why Superman has to die now. I simply inquire when is it ever a good time to die?
>
> How will Superman die? It doesn't matter who kills him. It doesn't even matter that the Man of Steel could be killed. The true importance of that question is the manner in which Superman will die. I simply say that Superman will die the same way he lived: bravely, heroically, and with honor. That's just the way it is.
>
> Rest in peace, Kal-El.
>
> Christopher Roestler
> Sparks, NV

> . . . I am eagerly looking forward to the remainder of the "Doomsday" (and follow-up) storylines. I have absolute confidence that the death of Superman, as well as the aftermath, will be sensitively, intelligently, and entertainingly handled. From what I've seen so far, I think that you're doing a great job. It's obvious you understand that it's important Superman not be killed by some silly gizmo like Lex Luthor or by some random natural catastrophe. You have pitted Superman, seemingly, against his opposite number . . . a battle against such a foe, even one that costs a hero his life, is an ennobling battle.
>
> Jon E. Hecthman
> Mt. Laurel, NJ[49]

Together with other fan mail in reaction to this series, these two share an underlying presumption: a superhero is entitled to a fair fight and not simply to be defeated by circumstances over which he has neither power nor control. With the annihilation of the supposedly invincible Man of Steel, death, success and triumph for superheroes were portrayed and perceived as neither easy nor always guaranteed. But in relishing Doomsday, no matter how reluctantly, the readers demanded at least that virtue should still pay off, that cause and effect be given their due, and the levelling of a legend not come from some divine intervention or magical force.

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[49] The first letter is from *Superman* No. 12, and the next is from No. 15. Both letters won a Baldy and a Platinum edition of SUPERMAN # 75, prizes for the best fan letter in an issue as decided by the Editors.

Even after Superman's burial, there was still general shock and disbelief about his death, and very shortly thereafter, the hero was sighted simultaneously in different parts of Metropolis. The people who testified seeing him varied in their descriptions and agreed only on one point: a "Superman" helped them out of a critical situation and prevented a life-threatening crime or accident from happening. Indeed, there were about four or five costumed characters claiming to be the real Superman, and as each one is revealed to be an imposter, what constitutes the identity of a superhero may be seen. The first one is "The Man of Steel" (introduced in *Superman* 22: late May 1993) who was easily discredited because he wore a very different costume from the real Superman. It was metallic and covered his entire body, including his face. "The Man of Steel" had to don this suit of armor because he was Black and had to hide his face. Accosted by Lois Lane, he also did not know anything about Superman's personal life, and his pretense could not last long, because there was not much with which to keep the readers guessing. Another one is "The Last Son of Krypton" (introduced in *Superman* # 687: June 1993) who is actually the nearest to the real one. His story was also the most plausible as, in some invisible elemental form, he was shown actually retrieving Superman's body from the casket. Among the others, he was also the only one with a clear knowledge of Clark Kent, and Clark's affection for Lois. However, he rejects this past and part of Superman and rejects Lois Lane as well. In doing so, suspicions are cast in readers' minds about his verity. Another impostor was called "The Metropolis Kid" (introduced in *Superman* 501: late June 1993) who is, however, too young, too immature and juvenile to capture the readers' interest. He is portrayed as continuously craving publicity and too indecisive in his choices of girls/women. He is also easily discounted because he lacks the loyalty, temperance and courage that Superman exuded. The last Superman is "The Man of Tomorrow" (introduced in *Superman* 78: June 1993), half-machine, half-man whose DNA structure even matches those of the real Superman. However, being a cyborg, he is too mechanistic and too unformed in his humanity, relying too much on mechanical power which goes against the true Superman's nature. Moreover, he sets Doomsday free and destroys a whole city--questionable actions which betray his identity and intentions to everyone.

Reviewing the reasons or characterizations which invalidated the personalities described above from being Superman, we can say that superhero texts abide by the following precepts: a) a non-white person, even if male, is too marginal to be THE superhero for the mainstream comicbook consumers; b) a superhero usually maintains an object of love, which renders him more human and personal, and more attuned to his second identity (the Last Son of Krypton reveals his loss of humanity by his inability to love Lois Lane and by extension, by the rejection of his alter ego, Clark Kent); c) a superhero does not exhibit youth, immaturity, impulsiveness, and lack of mental and physical control; and d) a superhero is never too mechanical and never employs his powers for destruction and self-gain. All these precepts revert to the social concept of masculinity and control and power discussed above.

End Remarks

Masculinity is as much a cultural construct as femininity, although its relationship to a patriarchial society produces different textual constructions and reading practices. Comicbooks cater largely to male audiences and have less need to produce a double text that encourages the circulation of oppositional or resistive meanings. However, this is not to say that men do not experience problems with patriarchy's construction of masculinity. It may be that the popularity of a wide variety of superhero and adventure comics depends to a greater or lesser extent on the degree of meanings which they offer adolescent boys to use in coming to terms with differences between their experiences and the social construction of masculinity which is offered as the way to make sense of those experiences. In viewing superhero texts as dispensing an ideological construction--masculinity, it is unproductive to chide these texts for their omissions, distortions and conservative affirmations. It is more crucial to understand them; to let their very ommissions and distortions speak for themselves, to inform us of the contradictions they are meant to conceal and of the anxieties that lie behind them.

Few forms of comics narrative have enjoyed more widespread popularity than superhero stories, and few if any have been seen so consistently as proof positive that popular culture enforces the values of some dominant ideology. The figure of the superhero is supposedly a prime example of a henchman of the State, repetitively restoring order in aid of policemen and politicians. Having achieved popularity during the war years, a patriotic image of the superhero seemed to have remained in many people's mind. But already since the late 1950s, superheroes have often had problems with lawmen, and some are even more popularly known as vigilantes acting on their own. Some superheroes (also outsiders) have been depicted as consistently opposed to the state police force and to criminals. This doubly adversarial role makes superhero texts, especially the more recent ones, an interesting test case for the various scenarios of cultural production discussed in the preceding chapters of this study.

In varying degrees of severity and explicitness, the presence and polarity of superheroes and the superhero genre involve a critique rather than a celebration of a given society's judicial system. If society does enjoy a distinct and central power source, then why should there be the need for aberrant heroes? Acceptance of a social order should negate any need for independent crimefighters who are sometimes adversial to both state police and criminals. The code of the superheroes reveals a transcendent sense of justice that throws into question the accepted civil justice and the nature of "law" itself. As each superhero takes the "law" into his own hands, not only does an alternative sense of justice often develop which problematizes implicitly or explicitly the nature of "law," but each private and individual sense of justice throws into question the public one.

As presented above, the superhero genre generally questions the possibility of a satisfying happy ending. Although criminals of some kind are usually caught, this does not occur without showing criminality to be all pervasive in the human psyche and/or economic institutions which produce it. Justice is usually done, but only after the terms of what constitutes true justice have been established, most often by a superhero's personal code. The continuity of villains also indicates that crime usually pays and almost always is re-distributed. Because of its emphasis on crime, violence, and slaughter, and its redefinition of who and what is responsible for it as being endemic to our societies, superhero texts can, more often than not, be a discourse which forces contradictions rather than compromises. Justice and law are characterized as provisional, incomplete, and virtually unenforceable by a state increasingly incapable of understanding its complexity. In the process, the "law and order" pairing is itself destabilized. Once "law" is subject to multiple definitions, order becomes relative as well, and the race to authority becomes a free-for-all.

The idea of contradiction has been crucial to this study; it has in fact been an informing principle. The analyses offered in this chapter are predicated on the assumption that popular narratives such as comicbooks not only concern themselves with contradictions but may also funtion in a highly inconsistent manner. While appearing to be merely escapist, such art can simultaneously challenge and reaffirm traditional values, behaviours, and attitudes by the use of humour, parody and constant re-working of genre conventions that call attention to previously accepted codes, references and points of view. Finally, it must not be forgotten that the appeal of superhero texts depends a great deal on their identity as pure fantasy, with hardly any immediately perceptible basis and relation to reality, and which lends itself more to play and pleasure in reading than other more "serious" narratives. Being a popular narrative and currently a "live" creative form, comicbooks enjoy a contemporaneity which allows them faster expansion and growth than older, more defined genres. The next chapter will study generic transformations in superhero texts, as evidenced by the changes in the heroes themselves as protagonists, and their changing adventures which re-shape the narratives. Consequently, the concepts of identity and masculinity will be similarly re-evaluated and seen against the shifting and contradictory frames for assessing ideologies and perspectives in "official" and "popular" cultures.

Chapter Five

Superhero Transformations

I am, I am Superman
And I know what's happening
I am, I am Superman
And I can't do anything.

R.E.M.
"Superman"
Life's Rich Pageant

- not only do we no longer know if it is really (the familiar superheroes) we are watching, or a group of borderline psychotics, wearing the same costumes, playing a similar game, but driven by entirely different motivations that might push them over the edge at any moment.

Jim Collins
"Batman: The Movie, Narrative
and the Hyperconscious"

Factors that Changed the Superhero Comics

The superhero genre is tightly defined and defended by its committed readership--to the point of exasperation for many comics writers and artists who proclaimed it a worn-out formula as long ago as the early 1970s. Nevertheless, comicbook authors have to continue churning out the same tired narratives due to commercial demands which necessitated compliance with the fancy of the twelve to seventeen year old boys who have traditionally constituted the bulk of superhero fans. Up until 1944, the number of girls reading comicbooks was almost the same as boys, especially between the ages of 6 to 11. From this year on, however, there has been a steady decline in comicbook readership among girls, particularly in the superhero comicbooks.[1] Although girls continued to patronize funny animals and romance comics, in total numbers, there were noticeably more boys steadily reading comicbooks, coinciding with the persistent popularity of superhero comicbooks relative to general comicbook sales.[2] That the readership of superhero comicbooks since the 1940s was primarily male and adolescent has had much to do with the shaping of the nature of superhero characters and the narratives in the genre, as discussed in the preceding chapter.[3]

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[1] Much of what is now known about the audience during the early period of comics developed out of scholarly and public debate about the impact of this burgeoning media on children; See, for example, Alexis Tan and Kermit Scuggs, "Does Exposure to Comic Book Violence Lead to Aggression in Children?" *Journalism Quarterly* 57.4 (1980):579-583, Judith Duke, *Children's Books and Magazines: A Market Study* (New York: Knowledge Industry Publication, 1979); Willam Marston, "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics," *The American Scholar* 13 (1944): 35-44; Paul Lyess, "The Place of the Mass Media in the Lives of Boys and Girls," *Journalism Quarterly* 29.1 (1952):43-54.

[2] Since the 1970s, superhero comicbooks have ranked third among the most popular comics according to sales figures; second is the category of Sci-fi/Horror, and the first is the somewhat broad category called Adult Humour which is made up of such works as "Peanuts" and "Calvin and Hobbes." See Jack Lyle and Heidi Hoffman, "Children's Use of Television and Other Media," in *Television and Social Behaviour*, Vol. 4 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Mental Health, 1979): 121-256).

But what is interesting in addition to the gender component of the readership is the passionate interest the readers took in the content, details, and occasionally in the form of what they were reading. The readers of comicbooks steadily communicated these concerns with the writers, illustrators, editors, and each other. Letters poured in daily to Marvel and DC from fans who continually monitored and made suggestions concerning comics, providing a very direct line of communication between the industry and its committed readers. If a superhero performed out of character, if a change in plot line was unsatisfactory, if there was a small mistake in art work, the fans did not hesitate to express their feelings. In the columns of the comics themselves, fans and artists and editors exchanged views, accepted compliments, justified story lines, and reacted to previous letters. This communication has remained as active, if not more so, until the present as comicbook producers receive constant enthusiastic feedback from comicbook readers. The letters columns increasingly reflected an articulate readership which also signalled the rise of the age level of committed readers. Dennis

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[3] Even the attempt to attract more female readership by creating superheroines resulted in characters more memorable as examples of Good Girl Art in comics rather than characters whose adventures girls would enjoy following (see the section on "Masculinity and Identity" in the preceding chapter).

O'Neil, one of the most prominent figures in the comicbook industry and who has been an editor for both Marvel and DC, comments:

> (We) try to make the letters representative, an accurate sampling of fan opinion. If 75 percent of our mail hated a story, we will reflect that in the letter column. Most of our readership is articulate. If you go out to schools, as I do, you will find that the kids who read comics are the bright kids, the verbal kids. And then our marketing information shows that our average reader is twenty-four and male and very literate, so it is not surprsing that we get a pretty high percentage of articulate, literary letters. That is one of the changes that has come about. I no longer feel very much need to write down to anybody when I am doing a comic book. I feel a very large persistent need to honor the tradition out of which I am working, but I don't have to worry about using big words anymore or even big concepts."[4]

Thus, fan culture grew to parallel the commercial success of superhero comicbooks. What began as columns in the latter pages of the magazines, regular swapping or sharing of comicbooks, and some sporadic membership to clubs advertised within its pages has developed into a sense of fellowship later fostered through "fanzines" (fan magazines) and even gatherings where stories, personalities, and ideas are discussed and debated. The fans cultivated a sense of community where shared and cumulative special knowledge about comicbooks is acknowledged and esteemed. At present, specialist comicbook stores, comic marts, and full-scale conventions are the outward signs of a certain cohesion among highly loyal and knowledgeable comic fans, as is the highly organized market-place for buying, selling, and collecting old comics, the price guides, and blossoming comic forums, magazines and journals.[5]

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[4] Pearson and Uricchio, "Notes from the Batcave: An Interview with Dennis O'Neil," in idem, *The Many Lives of Batman* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 19-20.

The fan movement is generally acknowledged as having shaped part of the resurgence of superhero comicbooks in the 1960s after the Comics Code of 1954 halted the production of horror and crime comics, and subsequently damaged the industry as a whole by stigmatizing comicbooks. After this, the comics industry would never totally regain the same amount of consumer demand it enjoyed until 1954 due to the increasing popularity and accessibility of television which lured readers away from comics. Here again, however, the fans could be credited to a certain degree with sustaining the recovery of comics. The Overstreet *Comic Book Price Guide* observes that while fans were not a dominant segment in absolute numbers, they represented a powerful one due to the intensity of their interest and their large per-person purchases. These readers were more serious about comics, were privileged with more disposable income, and were known to buy several copies of one issue for investment purposes alone.[6]

To compound the problems created by the Comics Code and the loss of audience due to television in the late 1950s, the comics industry also started experiencing difficulties with their normal distribution system: their newsstand distributors did not give comics priority and thus hampered sales and expansion. Furthermore, their strategy was not favourable to promotion and advertising which was becoming more necessary to attract new readers. The strong competition from television, the loss of convenient sales outlets, and the very limited approach to advertising reduced the industry to dependence on hardcore fans and collectors by the 1970s. The comics industry was then forced to pay more attention to their fans, and initiated and encouraged more interaction with followers who were somewhat older than the general comic reader and getting to be increasingly knowledgeable about their comicbooks.[7] By the late 1960s, a small network of clubs and correspondences already began to develop, such that by the mid-1970s, a strong and vibrant collector's market had begun. The older Marvel readers became the core of the 1970s fan culture, most probably due to the early trend towards sophistication in the psychology and nature of their superheroes which Stan Lee started with Spiderman and for which the Silver Surfer with his Shakespearean speech patterns was known.[8]

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[5] Roger Sabin provides an extensive list of current comic fanzines and journals. See Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993): 305-306.

[6] Robert Overstreet, *The Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* (Tennessee: Overstreet Publications / House of Collectibles, annually).

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[7] The science fiction fandom started earlier and is more established than the superhero followers. The science fiction community also has more cross-overs to other science fiction venues like novels, short stories, television shows and movies. However, superhero comicbooks in general are more sought after and are more collectible in terms of price and nostalgia value in the comics collector's market.

[8] An Interview with Stan Lee in Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics* (London: Virgin, 1991): 112-118, 145-147.

The fact that many of these committed readers ended up as artists and writers who later worked for DC and Marvel, and in the 1980s, for the independent comics publishing houses as well attests to the impact this generation of superhero fans had on the industry. In fact, most of the well-known leading artists connected with the medium at present admit to having been fans themselves, to having grown up with their favorite superheroes and to having "been there," allowing them to develop a shrewd grasp of superhero fans' wishes and expectations. In addition, these artists regard themselves as being in some measure still very much a part of the field and the community: Alan Moore, Ed Hannigan, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, David Mazzucchelli, Len Wein, John Byrne, Gene Colan, Al Williamson, John Severin, Steve Englehart, Mark Gruenwald, are some of these central figures.[9]

Two major assumptions are supported by the existence of a cultivated fan community. Firstly, most people reading and writing commercial superhero comicbooks belong to that community, and secondly, they are not only broadly acquainted with, but have participated in the development of at least a sizeable proportion of what has been done and what is being done to the form and contents of superhero comicbooks throughout the fifty years of the genre's existence. In this sense, comic fans are not passive consumers of a cultural product. Indeed, they are in many ways active in its creation, more active with respect to audience interaction than with most mass-media situations such as television, the movies, music videos, or romantic fiction.[10] In addition, given the relatively close nature of the comics community, and the fact that many people now involved in the industry of producing comics came from the fandom culture, it is quite likely that the comics audience constitutes one of several direct and significant influences on the creative process and development of the genre. In his study of Batman readership, Patrick Parsons suggests an interesting point; that "contrary to the assumptions of some in both the popular and academic community, the impact of readers on the contents may be greater than the impact of the contents on the readers."[11] Concerned with the occasional neglect of the audience in the studies of cultural commodities, Patrick Parsons shows the many points of interaction between the producers and consumers of comicbooks, in particular the Batman. He sees the comics fan community as a specialized sub-culture--"a modern media-bound specialized community"--and shows how the various demographic, psychographic and ideological peculiarities of that community must be taken into consideration when critically analysing, for example, the current Batman which, for him, is "a product of a variety of cultural and industrial factors."[12]

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[9] See various interviews in David Anthony Kraft, ed. *Comics Interview* (New York: Fictioneer Books, published monthly since 1984); *Comics Scene* (New York: O'Quinn Studios, published quarterly since 1985); and *Comics Journal* (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, published monthly, n.d.).

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[10] An ideal example to show how influential the opinion of comicbooks fans can be is the infamous telephone poll which decided the death of Robin in 1988. For more details on the editors' decision about Robin's death, see Pearson and Uricchio, "Notes from the Batcave: An Interview with Dennis O'Neil," in *idem, The Many Lives of Batman* (London: Routledge, 1991): 20-23.

[11] Patrick Parsons, "Batman and His Audience," in Pearson and Uricchio, *The Many Lives of Batman* (London: Routledge, 1991): 67.

The comicbook fans/creators themselves are the real movers behind the story of the development of comicbooks. This is as true today as it was in the earlier phases of the genre. The youngsters who grew up with comicbooks have grown up to be those most involved now in publishing houses and/or media centers. This demographic factor has greatly affected the conception of comicbook characters and narratives and, accordingly, has also changed the production and distribution of comicbooks.

In addition to the aging of the fans and their establishment of a sense of community, the solution that the industry found to its distribution difficulties--direct sales and the specialist shop network--constitutes another factor influential in the transformation of the superhero genre. By 1981, an interesting and most welcome phenomenon occurred in the distribution, marketing, and selling of comicbooks. A network of several hundred specialty comicbook stores, selling almost exclusively comics and comic-related items, had spread out across the United States and Canada. Instead of relying on newsstands where comics competed for space with various other publications, the comicbook distributors supplied these specialty shops directly, complete with promotional flyers which announced upcoming issues, signalled the availability of back issues, indicated which issues were increasingly becoming scarce and pricier, and provided other tidbits of information for the comic buffs. These flyers started simply as order guides for the shops so that the publishers could estimate orders more accurately and stabilize press runs by reducing wastage from overproduction. Previously, DC and Marvel determined the number of copies the newsstands would receive but the newsstands always had the option of simply returning unsold issues, whether they were properly displayed or not. With the direct sales, returns could be avoided, new comicbooks could be promoted in advance, and more importantly, reader preferences could be better monitored.

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[12] P. Parsons, *ibid.*, 65-89.

This method of direct sales marked a switch from the traditional newsstand market to a comics culture based on collector value. It served to reinforce the fast emerging demographic trends in comicbook audience which involved a shift from popular market to a smaller, more specialized audience that would frequent and gather at the specialty shops and ask for comicbooks using titles of issues or series, names of authors and illustrators, dates of publication, specific cover art, etc. The efficiency afforded by direct sales made regular acquisition of particular issues easier compared to the previously uneven availability and operating inefficiencies of newsstand distribution. This enhanced the fans' recognition and appreciation of individual artists and cultivated an auteur system in comicbooks. The comics community now knows and follows the work of the principle artists and writers. The new comicbook specialty market with its attendant collector consciousness increased the value of comicbooks and made them not only commercially viable but attached a certain nostalgic, sub-culture-artefact prestige to them as well. In the light of the comicbooks' steadily shrinking audience, many credited the direct sales with rescuing the medium from sure collapse.[13]

As the number of specialty comicbook stores grew, a market developed that could support small press runs of comicbooks aimed at collectors. Smaller and creator-owned companies were motivated to produce for a more specialized market, recognizing the trend that there were enough collectors and readers who could support early limited efforts by smaller independent comicbook companies. By 1983, the direct comicbook market had become so well established that a number of new independent publishers decided to try their hands at comicbooks. Many of these small publishers were former fans and collectors who financed their new companies out of their own pockets (reminiscent of the Underground Comix movement in the 1960s). First Comics and Eclipse and Pacific were among the earliest. One that made a bigger dent was Kitchen Sink Press, already well-known as an underground comicbook publisher, which entered the collector's market by offering Will Eisner's *The*

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[13] Eddy Christman, "Direct Sales Rescues Comics," *Advertising Age* (June 25, 1984): 110; "Specialty Stores Increasing Share of Comic Market, Boosting Sales," *Variety* (July 8, 1987): 28; Kurt Eichenwald, "Grown-ups Gather at the Comic Book Stand," *New York Times* (Sept. 30, 1987): 1; "Biff! Pow! Comic Books Make a Comeback," *Business Week* (Sept. 2, 1985): 59.

Spirit and other "classics" in comicbook form for a new generation of readers.[14] Eagle Comics was another publisher that distributed its books exclusively to comicbook stores and its first title was *Judge Dredd* which is a popular British strip re-packaged for American audiences. Naturally, DC and Marvel also took advantage of this new development and started publishing for the specialized market as well, this time featuring writers and artists *by name* in a way previously uncommon in the comicbook industry. Since the core of comicbook fandom are proponents of the superhero genre, and so are most of the prominent artists, there was another resurgence in the popularity of superhero adventure stories.[15] This time, however, the heroes offered were markedly not mainstream in sensibility or appearance, but started showing distinctive deviations that are to characterize the current batch of superheroes.

By 1984, both Marvel and DC had started "re-inventing" or "re-vitalizing" their characters to cater to the new breed of older, more specialized, and more knowledgeable readers. In addition, there were also totally new readers now lured to the graphically and narratively mature and more sophisticated comicbooks. Marvel issued an Official Handbook for the Marvel Universe (December 1985) detailing characters for collectors in the new series. Marvel also celebrated its 25th anniversary by publishing the New Universe titles, supposed to be the beginning of the second Marvel cosmotology and mythology. DC published the "Crisis on Infinite Earth" series which allowed them to re-organize and simplify the DC world with its myriad of characters and universes for new readers, tie up loose ends in their superhero mythology and history, and revitalize them according to the new, more sophisticated lines. The most successful was DC's launching of a major revision of its two main characters: Superman was updated in the mini-series *The Man of Steel* (June 1986) and Frank Miller re-made Batman into an aging vigilante in his mini-series *The Dark Knight Returns* (March 1986). The best new series also came from DC. *Watchmen* (September 1986), by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, published as a series with twelve issues of 32 pages each, is a richly textured rendition of superheroes making sense of and functioning as heroes in a modern world while coping with "real world" problems like alcoholism, impotence, poverty, and so on.

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[14] Very clearly an exception, *The Sprirt* (1944) by Will Eisner reflected the current trend of superhero comics with adult elements. The Spirit looked and sometimes acted like a superhero, he even had the obligatory identity-concealing mask, but there was a sophistication in this strip that has never been seen before: "Eisner was strongly influenced by the pulps and film *noir*, and included in his stories *femmes fatales*, great deal of adult humour and settings involving beautifully-rendered shadowy cityscapes. He was also a master at conveying moods through the ingenious use of 'camera angles': "I always saw comics as an artform," he later said, "and I knew that there was a literate audience out there who would appreciate what I was doing." (Sabin, *op cit.*, 148). Although never a bestseller, *The Spirit* soon became the standard against which other comics would be measured, and would later be "rediscovered" by the underground, and later still by key creators in the 1980s. It is now considered as one of the classics of the medium.

[15] Philip Gritis, "Turning Superheroes into Super Sales," *New York Time* (Jan. 6, 1985): 6.

As the 1980s came to an end, comicbooks had re-established themselves as a vital and growing medium that continued to appeal to an ever-widening and expanding audience. By 1989, Marvel and DC still accounted for nearly seventy-five percent of all sales made in comicbook specialty stores, but there were also over seventy-five small and mid-size comicbook publishers turning out hundreds of titles.[16] The new form of marketing and distribution, which now gave more recognition and publicity to individual artists, inspired more creators to form their own publishing companies, make creator-owned lines of titles to be published and finally to abandon the "sweatshop atmosphere" of the two dominant comics publishers. Although limited in circulation, the independent comic books revitalized and strengthened the entire comicbook industry. Many artists who were disillusioned and/or cramped by bigger publishing houses worked for these independent publishers which resulted in the eruption of more new styles and influences than at any time in the past thirty years. The specialty stores and independent publishers also enabled more promotion, franchises, and regular availability of imported comics from Europe and Japan, opening a steady market for these in North America. In general, more comicbooks, in the form of graphic novels, compiled series and albums, were being sold than ever before and, since 1986, have begun to receive popular and critical attention and extraordinarily wide coverage in the mainstream press, in the style magazines, in the music papers, even in some business magazines. The renaissance in comicbooks and their new high media profile have altered the medium: all in all, the new releases are distinguished from their pre-"direct sales" predecessors by access to bigger budget (and consequently high-priced) status in all aspects of production, format, artwork, and above all, aggressive multi-media advertising.

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[16] Lisa Towle, "What's New in the Comic Book Business," *New York Times* (Jan. 31, 1988): 21; and "America is Taking Comic Books Seriously," *New York Times* (July 31, 1988): 7.

Heroic Transformations

Recognizing the appetite and buying power of the present audience, DC launched a line of comicbooks for older readers. It was not surprising that the bulk of these readers were nurtured in comicbooks at one time or another in their youth, if not actually coming from the fandom that steadily supported comicbooks even during its lean years from the late 1960s to the 1970s. The comics industry took advantage of an already existing, albeit dormant, interest in superheroes, while simultaneously catering to a new audience that did not have the same background knowledge of the genre: both Marvel and DC utilized the proven popularity of superheroes by revamping their major characters. The recent spate of graphic novels re-defined the origins and characters of heroes and villains while stirring up controversies by challenging some traditional notions of a superhero. By the late 1980s, most heroes were undergoing personality changes and character transformations. They ceased being superhuman and were shown to have problems in dealing with a darker, more corrupt modern world. Also noticeable is the hint of amorality which started to surround some superheroes as they worked more and more on the borderlines of the law: Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, and Green Lantern were all updated and revitalized into more complex, multi-dimensional characters. Retribution and revenge, for example, even became acceptable motives for becoming a superhero, like the Marvel Comics' *The Punisher* (July 1987) who seems to be a walking arsenal waiting for bad news to happen. Marvel's best-selling books were Spiderman and X-Men titles, both with the "new" concept of a superhero who is guaranteed neither definite triumph nor immortality.

But the credit for the renaissance of superheroes should be given more to the initiative and boldness of the creators themselves rather than to the corporate decisions undertaken by the big publishing houses. It is impossible to think of the re-making of superheroes without thinking of two names: Frank Miller who did *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), and Alan Moore who wrote *Watchmen (1986).* While both of these seminal works may be seen against the general upheaval and excitement in the field of comics at that time (*Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Love and Rockets* by the Hernandez Brothers also came out the same year), the superhero stories captured the imagination of the comics audience because they dealt simultaneously with something very familiar and very strange: heroes who have ceased to be superhuman, who sometimes even have problems with drugs, alcohol and sex, and above all, who grapple with notions of authority, power, and evil that are not always clear and against which they do not always win. *The Dark Knight* in particular was so successful that it is recognized not only as responsible for making Batman the most popular comic book hero but as playing no small role in the incredible burgeoning of the comics industry in the 1980s.[17] After this, more and more superhero comicbooks came out which addressed political, social, and moral issues, to participate in the recent boom in the re-definition of comicbook narratives and heroes. In gestures reminiscent of Frank Miller's preoccupation with transforming the heroes of comicbooks, many well-known artists participated in the rejuvenation of the genre. Citing intentions and views similar to Miller's, they acknowledged the enjoyment in both reading and creating new heroes while attesting to the increased possibilities available in transforming comicbook heroes in the context of a maturer, more serious narrative form. Interviews with those involved with the comics industry usually reveal an earnest interest and expansive awareness in what is going on with the industry and the genre, as well as in the narratives and artworks of other comics artists. In these interviews, as well as in the comics coverage of mainstream press, there is a tone of seriousness that has been long ignored when dealing with comicbooks. Similarly, superheroes that used to be considered ridiculous for prancing around in colorful tights are now discussed sensibly, according to the new perception of heroes that now frames comicbooks. Frank Miller, for example, comments about the *Dark Knight:*

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[17] Pearson and Urrichio, "Introduction," in *idem, The Many Lives of Batman* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). This transformation into a darker, more intriguing Batman is apparently also the reason for the success of the new Batman movies.

> "I was working on a revivification of a folk hero, but I was reaping all the benefits of fifty years of the hero's history. It's true also with Alan (Moore) because you couldn't really approach Watchmen without growing up with the Justice League of America. Now I'm trying to build walls to push against. With Batman that's easy because you know the rules of the game."
>
> "Even with the nuclear backdrop and the contempt for superheroes expressed by the world at large in Dark Knight, I don't think Dark Knight is pessimistic . . . it has a hopeful ending. The book starts with Bruce Wayne contemplating suicide; at the end he's found a reason to live. He's adjusted to the times. . . The key transition is his recognition he's no longer part of the authority. That's really the transition at the end of Dark Knight, this knowledge that he's no longer on the side of the powers that be anymore, because the powers that be are wrong."[18]

Although there have been many attempts to make superheroes more multi-dimensional, especially psychologically, since the 1960s, there has been a marked difference in the changes in the 1980s: there seems to be an underlying cynicism in the revamping of the genre rather than simply an imaginative elaboration of an old genre. A connection seems apparent between the increased cynicism of the major superheroes and an apocalyptic impulse in mass culture and a certain impotence in dealing with it, both of which, not surprisingly, coincides with the prevalent sentiment of today's

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[18] Chris Sharrett, "Batman and the Twilight of the Idols: An Interview with Frank Miller," in Pearson and Urricchio, *op cit.*, 34 and 37.

Generation X.[19] Considering the active interaction of comics with the shifting demographics of its audience, especially in order to remain a commercially viable product, one can relate the generic changes in the medium and the conception of heroes therein with the prevailing notions within the broader cultural settings. As refracted through comicbook heroes, these notions centre around more ambiguous definitions and conceptions of authority, more compromises in formulating ideologies, and the underlying feeling of societal decline, all of which may be witnessed in other such media as television, popular songs, and films. Both *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*, for example, comment directly on the post-Vietnam syndrome in the US with its ensuing loss of faith in the moral integrity of the State and its agents (see Appendices 58 and 59).[20] In addition, there is a pervading atmosphere of anger, frustration and bitterness over the general signs of increasing corruption and violence in American society as may be seen in Bruce Wayne's decision to team up with the rightist members of the Mutant Gang (*Dark Knight*) and in Ozymandias' orchestrated destruction of New York city, in the belief that the world can be saved only after total annihilation (*Watchmen).*

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[19] Hence the quote from one of Generation X's most popular band, R.E.M., in the beginning of this chapter.

[20] **Appendix 58**: In this page, one sees a classic example of "passing the buck." True or not, people believe that government officials try to evade the responsibility for a problem, while hoping that someone else can take the blame. In **Appendix 59**, people representing various sectors of society give their diverse opinions about a problem plaguing America. The use of a television box to frame these voices reflects the collision of discourses in society increasingly made possible by mass media, as well as the ensuing confusion and uncertainty regarding truth claims.

The world of superheroes used comfortably to position its readers as white, middle-class American males--this was the ideological position necessary to make sense of the superhero texts easily and unproblematically. The best superheroes were male, white, were literate (if not as superheroes then at least their alter egos), never suffered from poverty, were ensconced at least in middle class values, if not of a higher social class, and (directly or indirectly) communicate that violence can be justified if it is used "properly" in upholding the law. The villains were always distinguishable from the "good guys." In the end, the superhero always won and restored order, even if most of the comicbook was devoted to the eruption of crime and evil and to elaborate displays of fighting and violence. More recently, however, creators of comics have mixed up these codes and have even intentionally directed us not to submit to these old, comfortable viewpoints. In Neil Gaiman's *Black Orchid*, for example, the lead character is a female hero who is caught and exposed by crimelords within the first four pages. Although superheroes are always discovered and threatened at crucial moments, something unanticipated happens in this story. The man who catches Black Orchid says:

> "Hey, you know something? I've read comics. . .I'm not going to lock you up in the basement before interrogating you. . .then leave you alone to escape. That stuff is so dumb. But you know what I am going to do? I'm going to kill you. *Now*. (See Appendix 60).[21]

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[21] Neil Gaiman, *Black Orchid* (New York: DC Comics, 1989) n.p.

Then, he not only ruthlessly shoots Black Orchid in the head but sets her on fire as well. It is a startling moment because as the killer tells Black Orchid that he understands how the rules of the superhero genre work, he was not merely addressing an endangered heroine but also the readers of that genre in a way never so directly done before. The writer clearly signals that all the familiar rules of comic book storytelling--all those rules that insure hard-earned triumphs for the heroes and the inevitability of justice--will not apply in this narrative. As Mikal Gilmore observes in his Introduction to this graphic novel:

> (In *Black Orchid*) We are not only at the beginning of a new story, we are at the beginning of a new *way* of telling such a story. It is not just the Black Orchid who is killed in these opening pages: It is also the ethos of the super-hero genre that is being set up for its long overdue death.[22]

Black Orchid does not follow the expected phases of a hero adventure: it does not revolve around the heroine seeking out the enemy; she does not succeed in exposing an organization dedicated to crime and corruption, which she was bent on doing. She rescues the man who killed her father and destroyed all the other heroines, and most importantly, up to the end, she refuses to kill people who were threatening her and her "daughter" at gunpoint.

Frank Miller's *Sin City*, meanwhile, inverts the usual hierarchy of justice. The readers' sympathy is directed towards societal outcasts like prostitutes, strip dancers and hired killers who live in the margins of middle-class residential suburbia, and fight against atrocities which are organized by the police, the well-known citizens of the main city, even the archbishop who comes from the most established family in the society depicted. Miller's heroes are also motivated more by wrath and personal revenge rather than by a higher sense of justice or the good of the many. Furthermore, the stark black and white landscape of *Sin City* rendered by Miller's sharp, rugged lines flaunts equally tough heroes who are far from being asexual like their predecessors in comicbooks geared for younger readers. In fact, in *Sin City* both male and female bodies are shown bare and erotically, although often in obscure and shadowy outlines due to Miller's clever use of the chiaroscura effect. In a distortion of justice, one hero, Marv, dies despite his revelation of the real mastermind behind a series of hideous murders. *Sin City* also participates in the re-creation of a new mythology for the genre where accepted customs of the superhero parables are suspended, and the moods and tones are much closer to the darker dreams and darker realities of modern-day life.

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[22] *Black Orchid*, n.p. Mikal Gilmore is a senior writer for the *Rolling Stone*.

Batman as a Mobile Signifier

If there is one figure most closely associated with the search for and creation of new superheroes, it would be the Batman, who has now outranked Superman as the most popular superhero.[23] The Batman started as a part of the

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[23] That is, in terms of comicbook sales and figures from box office sales of their movies in North America which is still the biggest market for these two media. But despite the recent prevalence of Batman due to Hollywood, I believe that, internationally, more people would know

Superman tradition and a contrast to it, being much closer to the then pulp vogue for masked crime fighters such as the Shadow who, having no superpowers or guaranteed immortality, was more of a sleuth than superhuman. Other heroes would follow this path, thus establishing a sub-category within the superhero genre.[24] Unlike most comicbook heroes who were created as a result of freak accidents or who were born with supernatural powers, the Batman decided to transform himself mentally and physically. He did not find himself thrown into advantageous or extra-ordinary circumstances, but consciously and systematically laboured to achieve his position as an individual empowered to combat crime and senseless deaths in order to alleviate his anger and frustration at the brutal murder of his parents. In the more recent comicbooks, Bruce Wayne's transformation into a bat is given more mystical, more psychotic, more metaphorical overtones, making the Batman's psychology and motives increasingly complex without, however, contradicting previous details in the Batman's mythology. It is remarkable how various writers have worked with very well-known material and managed to re-define the Batman character without threatening the coherence of the fans' cherished experience and knowledge of his nature. Indeed, the multiple

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about the origins and myths surrounding Superman than the Batman.

[24] According to Roger Sabin, *op cit.*, 146, the quality of this sub-category should not be exaggerated, however, since a crucial difference between the superhero and detective is that the former replaced a certain cerebralness of detective fiction with a greater degree of action, thereby appealing to a much younger readership.

refractions of the Batman character seemed to have made him fuller instead of fragmenting him into obscurity.

The writer who started the Batman into his renewed direction, both textually and commercially, is Frank Miller who wrote *Batman: Year One* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. In *Dark Knight Returns*, Miller presents an aging, almost alcoholic Bruce Wayne who reluctantly dons the Bat costume after a ten-year absence as the nocturnal vigilante of Gotham City. Here, as in subsequent Batman narratives by various authors, Gotham City is much grimmer and more decadent, overrun with rabid streetgangs, sociopathic murderers, and policemen who are not always upright. The dangerous and unpredictable Two-Face is pronounced cured and released into society after surgery which fixes his scarred face. Furthermore, psychiatrists plead for the release of the homicidal Joker on strictly humanitarian grounds. Batman, aided by a female Robin, must fight the destruction wrought by a Mutant Gang, the irrational crime of the Joker, and the naivety and narrow-mindedness of a Reagan-supporting Superman. The values of the world presented in this narrative are no longer as certain and defined as they traditionally were in the superhero genre, while the artist Lynn Varley's shift from the clear, bright, primary colors of the conventional comicbook into more subtle and greyish tones visually underlines this obscurity. There is an oddly tentative ending pointing towards retreat, detachment and disengagement - with Bruce Wayne's amused acceptance and resignation that Batman's time as a crimefighter has passed. Yet, he organizes the Mutant Gang into an "army to bring sense to a world plagued by more than thieves and murderers," acknowledging that the call towards justice and order is still irresistible, but that there is simply much more reluctance on Bruce Wayne's part.

Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, meanwhile, plays with very ambiguous standards for sanity and insanity. Two narratives--the personal and scientific journal of a brilliant psychiatrist Amadeus Arkham and the Batman's tribulations in his Asylum more than half a century later--effectively intertwine and confuse the boundaries and relations between intelligence, sanity, insanity, and memory. Unlike most previous superhero stories, narrative privileging is not conferred on the hero, Batman. Instead, the tale constantly shifts between Dr. Arkham's memories, the accounts of the current inmates in Arkham, most of whom are confined there because of the Batman, and the Batman's encounters with these bizarre creatures, as he struggles to go through the tunnels of the asylum for a better understanding of himself and his enemies. With the variety of languages and points of view that are textually and visually built into *Arkham Asylum*, it is difficult to determine whose story is being told, to whom, and why. In the expectations and myths which superhero comics tended to create and reinforce, a privileged mode of expression usually emerged as the narrative unfolded. There can be languages that take prominent places in turns, but eventually, there is only one that is chosen to speak the truth and advance the narrative to its accepted conclusion. A very common though largely unnoticed privileging presents the narrative through the perspective of the lead character, and in most popular American superhero comicbooks, this is usually the ubiquitous crime-fighting superhero. Specific narrative devices grant the superheroes narrative centrality and, in addition, often cede to them narrative authority through point-of-view frames, first person narration and other textual and graphic cues which foster reader identification with him and his exploits. This process emphasizes the hero's hegemonic role and function and fosters the reader's acceptance of the hero's hegemonic traits and ideas. The relative positions of the other languages and meanings in the text are determined by the systematic privileging of one over the others, usually that of the main hero whose truths lead as well to triumph and moral superiority. But a systematic privileging of the Batman, either textually or visually, is not conspicuous in this tale. The Joker, for example, who leads the rebellion of the inmates against the asylum's authorities, comes across just as imposing as the Batman, and is even described by a psychotherapist as:

> (The Joker is) a special case. Some of us feel he may be beyond treatment. In fact, we're not even sure if he can be properly defined as insane.
>
> It is quite possible we may actually be looking at some kind of super-sanity here. A brilliant modification of human perception. More suited to urban life at the end of the twentieth century.[25]

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[25] Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, *Arkham Asylum* (New York: DC Comics, 1989): n.p.

Dave McKean's richly-textured illustrations and use of photo montage, in addition to the somber colors and tight, overlapping panel formatting and multi-tiered page lay-outs, leave a very cryptic and erratic impression of the total narrative. The ending, as well, is very vague--Batman's "freedom" and the permission to leave Arkham alive is granted through a whim by one of his demented enemies, Two-Face.

Arkham Asylum is an excellent example of a "post-modern" texture manifested in an increasing number of contemporary graphic novels which employ textual and visual pastiche of material from books, newspapers, paintings, songs, scientific reports, advertisements, and the like (see Appendices 61 and 62).[26] In only eight words, the Batman's origin is re-told through a series of dreamlike and seemingly unrelated images juxtaposed with the Batman's controlled suffering and the Joker's delight during a psychiatrist's interrogation (see Appendix 63).[27] Two narratives about the journey to madness--that of Dr. Arkham's and the Batman's--alternate and intertwine in this book sub-titled "The Passion Play, As it is Played Today." Citations and images from other books abound and overlap in this text, particularly from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* As well, references to real people like Carl Gustav Jung lend realism to Arkham's personal and professional journals (see Appendix 64). All throughout, however, no certainty is ever given the reader as to the rationality of any of the characters in the book. An undercurrent of volatile violence, delicately held in check, runs through the whole narrative. Arkham allows a dangerous and demented patient, Mad Dog Hawkins, to roam free. In a session with Arkham, Hawkins claims that the Virgin Mary instructs him to mutilate only the faces and sexual organs of his victims. Hawkins also states that he cuts himself with a razor "Just to feel. Just to feel something!" Later, Arkham comes home to find his wife and young daughter butchered by the Mad Dog. Nevertheless, Arkham again accepts Hawkins as a patient and, one year to the day of his family's massacre, straps him to the electroshock and burns him. The incident is treated as an accident by the psychiatric community. Arkham also kills his mother with a razor. But he was not locked up in the asylum, however, until he attempted to kill his stockbroker. Arkham's memories haunts the asylum, driving the present Dr. Cavendish to free the inmates and to kill the Batman. Lost in the jumble of recollections of others as well as his own, the Batman impales his palm with a piece of broken glass to remind himself of the present and dull his anguish over his parents' murder with physical pain. All these doings are punctuated by the laughter and the jesting of the Joker, who reveals his profound knowledge of the Batman and the other inmates of the asylum in his wisecracks and badinage. A multitude of voices, memories and dreams battle to relate the story of Arkham, but the reader is left to his/her own resources as the Joker proclaims: "Let the Feast of Fools begin!" (see Appendix 65).

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[26] In *Watchmen,* for example, quotes from the Bible, Nietzsche, Elvis Costello, William Blake, Bob Dylan, Carl Gustav Jung, to name a few, litter the text. Newspaper clippings, scientific reports, pages from a diary, pages from *Treasure Island*, posters, postcards and letters are incorporated into the book. **Appendix 62:** From Chapter Three onwards, the tale in the comicbook of a boy in the sidewalk who reads about the moral decline of a shipwreck survivor runs parallel to the commentary a news vendor gives about the decline of American society. In *Black Orchid*, one of the main characters constantly sings and the text of the songs act to move the narrative forward. He also judges the personality of another character through the latter's choice in the jukebox.

[27] This particular re-telling of the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents depends a great deal on prior knowledge of the Batman's origins by its readers.

Batman is shown to have a special relation with, but also a strange fear of Arkham Asylum, which is featured in many of the new graphic novels published by DC, even those which do not belong to the Batman series. It is now treated as a repository of dark secrets, undisclosed life stories, revelations from raving lunatics, but nevertheless a place which superheroes--the Black Orchid, Sandman, and the Batman, for example--have to confront if they want to possess precious information unavailable anywhere else. Access to information is increasingly becoming an important object for control, power and victory in the present batch of superheroes who depend more on craft and cunning than on brute strength. Whereas in previous comics, the seat of information was usually some governmental or institutionalised center, proper information in the newer tales is accessed from unexpected places like Arkham. *The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore, for example, exemplifies the lack of information about the Joker, either in the Batman's elaborate computers or in Gordon's precinct files. The Batman usually has to make the rounds of the tougher spots in town--bars, jails, the red light district, even talk to some crime lords--in order to trace the Joker's whereabouts.[28] The Sandman not only went to Arkham Asylum, but conferred with three witches and wandered the slums of London in order to learn how he could regain the power-amulets that were stolen from him.[29] Arkham Asylum seems to incarnate the inversion of standards and the blurring of boundaries in the new graphic novels which attempt to reflect the confusion in today's existence. This is addressed by Dr. Arkham as he remarks:

> I see now the virtue in madness, for this country knows no law nor any boundary. I pity the poor shades confined to the Euclidean prison that is sanity. All things are possible here and I am what madness has made me. Whole. And Complete. And free at last.[30]

Another Batman comicbook, *Night Cries* by Archie Goodwin, reveals qualms about the existence of a social reality that can still be understood in relatively stable categories in a fixed relationship to each other, and the underlying structures that invisibly organize these categories. *Night Cries* deals with drug use and child abuse and explicitly shows that these problems are experienced across social classes. In the overpowering sense of futility in both Police Commissioner Jim Gordon and the Batman as they deal with the crises in this tale, there are echoes of an unstated conviction that the prime determinant of social order is economic. However, social class, which previously was a key in both analysing and solving social problems, is revealed to be a weak link in the cases spanning from the poor, black families from "the Heights" to the rich, white families with famous names. The identity and motivation of the criminal is logical, but unexpected in that he is not as marginalized as villains in superhero comics usually are. Another noticeable inversion in this story is the hint that Bruce Wayne's money seems more effective than the Batman in being able to deter child abuse. As well, the usually upright Jim Gordon is portrayed ambiguously as trying to solve a crime concerning child abuse that he himself is shown to have suffered and now seems to be prone to repeat. The building up of the situations and circumstances which prevent direct action from either Gordon and Batman in the tale's conclusion produce some discomfort, uncertainty, and an active desire in the reader to think through contradictions in *Night Cries*, not only in textual terms but also in the reader's social experiences.

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[28] *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics 1988. Alan Moore (Story); Brian Bolland and John Higgins (Illustration).

[29] *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*. DC Comics Vertigo, 1991. Neil Gaiman (Story); Sam Kieth, Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones (Illustration).

[30] *Arkham Asylum, op cit.*, n.p.

Ending Remarks

If some of the arenas of social and political struggles are changing, so too are the frameworks used to comprehend the issues within them. The relativization of good and evil, and the instability of the standards by which to judge these categories, have also blurred the boundaries between heroes and villains (see Appendix 66). Increasingly apparent in recent Batman texts is the ambiguity of the relationship between the hero and his most famous antagonist, the Joker. There are numerous times when the Batman could have killed the Joker but intentionally did not. Apart from commercial demands to keep the Joker alive, this antagonist's presence has become a key component in defining the Batman character. The Batman and the Joker have been featured together for such a long time that one almost serves as the springboard for the other's identity. In *Arkham Asylum* and *The Killing Joke,* for example, as in numerous other Batman texts, the Joker goads and teases the Batman to admit the similarities between them in order for the Batman to know his real self.

Many superheroes are not complete without their villainous counterparts: a villain like the Joker continues issue after issue, story after story, trying to sabotage the social order in an endless treadmill of destruction which the Batman struggles to control and contain. Chief Police Commissioner Gordon, as well as the whole of Gotham City, depend only on the Batman to restrain the

Joker. However, the Batman never defeats the Joker. And often unable to preserve a line between himself and the psychotic killer he hunts, the Batman increasingly calls his own sanity into question. The relationship between these two characters is an on-going discourse in which both the play of multiple identities and the acts of appropriation are fundamental. It is indicative of the uncertainty in this discourse though, to realize that rather than presenting a picture of law and order, these characters together highlight lawlessness. Both are marginalised personalities that live on the fringe of society, and demand a fuller expression than society normally allows.

In comparison to the problems of a previous generation of superheroes who could usually solve problems with the use of muscle and violent bravery, the surge in impasses and frustrations that superheroes now experience reveals a crumbling faith in the total eradication of crime and criminal elements. As well, it initiates a re-evaluation of the emphasis on musculature which came to dominate American comicbooks (and the very popular action cinema), which depended upon an idealization of the white, male body to signal the visual articulation of masculinity.[31] There is noticeably less emphasis on musculature in the more recent comicbooks, where the Batman is represented and recognized more and more solely by his cape and bat-ears silhouette, while heroes like Black Orchid and Sandman were never meant to be muscular at all. Similarly, and in keeping with the increased subtlety of contemporary narratives, neither are the villains of contemproary comic books characterized by physical might and muscle. Although the spectacle of battle and violent scenes are still found in graphic novels, the proportion in narrative space is much less than the comicbooks before 1986. Instead, the dilemmas presented by the villains or problems that have to be resolved are weightier than those a simple brawl can solve. Increasingly the problems presented pose more profound questions about the structure and stability of the social order. In early comicbooks, the difference between preferred and oppositional reading was more clear cut as preferred interpretations were more clearly inscribed in the construction of the narrative. These were shown through visual punctuation of the hero and a more unequivocal protrayal of evil and the villains. The textual and visual sophistication of present graphic novels toys with the narrative structure by presenting a montage of voices, many of them contradictory, which invites more participation from the reader, while playing with the reader's stored competencies and frames for reading superhero comics and the creation of meanings therein. These selection processes are intentionally manipulated by authors to highlight certain choices and "narcotize" others; though not always to provide a narrative structure powerful enough to dictate which voice one should pay attention to, or which voice could be used as a framework by which to understand the rest. Many new comic hero narratives interweave different voices which allows for the invasion of other texts, social experiences and background of readers, as well as other media influences on the character and the theme being used.

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[31] In keeping with the glorification of a muscular male body, advertisements for bullworkers and other gadgets for body-building litter the pages of comicbooks.

Understanding of the complex processes of signification at work in the re-construction of the superhero and its genre rests a great deal on intertextuality which proposes that any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledges is brought to bear upon it. These relationships do not take the form of specific allusions from one text to another, and there is no need for readers to be familiar with specific texts to read intertextually. Superhero comicbook intertextuality refers not to specific texts but rather to our culture's image bank of a superhero with extra-ordinary strength and a higher than average concept of moral value. It is an elusive myth to which all former and existing superheroes contribute equally and from which they draw equally. The meanings and transformation of the "hero" in the more recent graphic novels depend upon allusions to former Batman texts and upon the intertextuality with *all* superhero texts that contribute to and draw upon the meaning of "the hero" in our culture. Intertextual knowledge pre-orient a reader to exploit the polysemy of comicbooks by activating texts in certain ways, that is, by making some meanings rather than others. Studying a text's intertextual relations can provide us with valuable clues to the readings that a particular culture or subculture is likely to produce from it. Studying the intertextual relations of the more recent uses of superheroes can provide us with valuable clues as to the kind of readings present readers make, the changes in conception of hierarchies of power, and the resolutions of problems which are alluded to by the changing concept of "hero" in popular culture as gleaned in the comics.

Earlier pleasures of superhero comicbooks were primarily spectacle rather than narrative and dialogue; they were defined more by general visual qualities which defined the experience of reading or the desire to follow adventures. More recent ones maintain a bit more emphasis on the operations of the narrative, hence bringing to the fore the dynamics of conformity/transgression of generic conventions. Generic knowledge and a sense of parody represent a growing aspect in more recent superhero production and consumption as fandom members delight in manipulating their knowledge and expectations. In the process, new readers are attracted to follow developments in a genre that many may have given up on. The renaissance of superhero comicbooks, containing a re-evaluation of heroes and consequently of society and modern day values, has pushed several questions to the forefront of our consciousness. What is it about the genre, once thought of as juvenile and prosaic, which may have allowed contemporary artists to use it to such powerful narrative and visual ends?

In today's world with rapidly and constantly shifting landscapes, we demand new themes, new insights, and new characters. Comicbooks, formerly cramped not only by censorship but also by its format and readership, have broken free from these shackles to demonstrate that it can be used to effectively and artistically explore social issues and abstract concepts while remaining entertaining and accessible to a wide audience. Although certain conventions within superhero narratives pull towards tradition and repetition, and towards a particular brand of individualism and faith in authority, there is nevertheless nothing necessarily conservative in the form per se. Different writers do, and have always done, very different things with its generic constraints; this space of free choices has resulted in the development of more sophisticated graphic novels available now. There is presently a growing number of artists who continue to display exceptional talent with the medium--in telling sophisticated stories with innovative narrative techniques, both visually and textually. The mix media and visual impact of comicbooks give them an inherently sensationalistic and entertaining appeal, as well as the capability to get over quite detailed points of fact, quite subtle intellectual or moral points in a way which a wider range of people can absorb. With the loss of constraints that used to bog the medium down--regarding length of narratives, and what may or may not be written or illustrated--comicbooks may have an advantage over purely textual publications in catching the attention of readers.

In an age of communication and entertainment through visual stimulation, comicbooks participate in the iconic feature of most modern media which permeates our present lives. This unique visual focus is not discernible in the traditional literary reading. It suggests that popular culture is doing something specific and different from high culture, something which should not be denied serious analysis nor, in the case of comicbooks, dismissed as irrelevant due to prejudices formed mainly from outdated perceptions.

Concluding Remarks

We now live in a visual age: a time when videotapes and paperbacks vie for space in bookstores, when books are available in CD-ROMs, film history is taught in universities, and directors of blockbusters like *Forrest Gump* or *Pulp Fiction* are requested by name in video stores, or discussed in breakfast places and gas stations. To enjoy 20th century entertainment, and to understand the social determinants which shape its production and reception, one has to be pop literate and visual literate. Everywhere today, one sees graphic evidence of a kind of communication through visual stimulation unique to the twentieth century, particularly in the mass-created images that various media promulgate commercially through advertising, styles of dresses, automobile technology, household luxuries, and the promotion of the lifestyles of the rich and famous. With their own visual syntax, comics have contributed to the visual media which modern society has come to know and depend on for entertainment and for insights to modern life. Like many other genres once dismissed as escapist and frivolous--such as romance fiction, TV Soaps, science fiction, crime and detective texts--comics are now perceived as revealing windows on our lives and times, without losing their charm as pop pastimes. They have served as a common cultural touchstone by having generated easily recognizable myths and a discourse that appeal to people divided by nationality, geography, class and age. Overcoming a past riddled with suspicion and negative criticism, comics have managed to remain as one of the twentieth century's popular forms of mass entertainment.

This study was undertaken to generate different kinds of thinking about comicbooks and go beyond the thumbs up/thumbs down way with which they were previously evaluated. By analysing comicbooks using multi-disciplinary approaches from cultural studies, I hoped to show that the medium may be used effectively and artistically to raise and explore relevant social issues regarding concepts of culture in relation to conflict between individuals, conflict with establishments and authorities, conflict between genders, and so on. These concerns, far from being alien to the medium, have often been the material of comicbook narratives. But the enduring perception of comicbooks as juvenile and inferior entertainment has distracted from this fact. At present, however, the potentially radical concerns which have often been at the heart of the form are imaginatively utilized in response to the modern day need for new themes, new insights, and new heroes. Comicbooks, or graphic novels, in the last decade have increasingly combined the medium's inherently sensationalistic and entertaining visual appeal with more mature and sophisticated treatment of moral and social topics.

Currently, the general climate in the comicbook scene is very encouraging. The critics are more knowledgeable about the origin, development, and artistic trends of the medium, as well as the history and conventions of specific comicbook characters and narratives which are constantly referred to. The consumers display an increasing refinement in reading practices and preferences due to a cultivated cumulative knowledge about comicbook conventions. A growing number of artists in the field display exceptional talent with the medium and, together with almost non-existent constraints regarding contents and style, are able to change the previous perception of a comicbook as cheap magazine publication.

The general changes in the perception of comicbooks are not isolated. The current interest in the medium participates in the growing acceptance and appreciation of forms from popular culture and the mass media not only in the mainstream press, but also within the academy. A discipline like literary criticism, which has a well-established tradition of interpretation and analysis, can benefit the study of comicbooks. Conversely, applying its theories and methodologies to a subject like comicbooks or television may offer instances and contexts that sharpen theoretical questions by introducing issues of affective structure, i.e., the social interaction and collaboration between makers and audience, and shaping of the context for cultural expectations. It is crucial in the case of comicbooks, for example, to see the changes in the medium's aesthetic and formal features in relation to external factors like the social circumstances in which comicbooks were produced, the prevailing commercial requirements and constraints, and how readers were able to relate to these. The sophistication conceded to sequential art in the last decade suggests that specific formal devices do not carry an innate or essential meaning but seem to involve an equation between aesthetic strategies and social worth to gain critical enthusiasm and general public prestige. Some of the factors that might be most useful to point to, particularly in thinking about hero or action comicbooks, is the advent of comicbook-literate readers and critics, the vitality of comics specialty shops, and fanzime communities which have all generated a rise in the social status of comicbooks. Another is the decline of the newsstand distribution and the big production house system which made way for a myriad of independent publishers over the last ten years, carrying with them the connotations of an oppositional movement, but also a longer history of experimentation and innovation in the art. Equally significant are the numerous appropriations of comicbook characters and images in film, television, and commercial art like T-shirts, posters, CD covers, and the like, which are crucial in making a different kind of success possible for both the medium and the artists working in it to make money, to reach a different audience, and to push comics into a higher visibility in the mainstream awareness. These increasing multi-media crossovers represent a distinctive shift in the production, distribution, and recycling of comicbook images and open up implications in the analysis of contemporary comicbook culture.

The visual and textual transposition, allusion, parody and quotation going on across various media in popular culture work to quilt together sometimes seemingly contradictory genres, styles, and narratives from the past and present in a variety of complex ways. Corollary to the often playful recycling which mass media is capable of, indeed on which it thrives, is an increased awareness of the ways in which audiences can appropriate and re-define aspects of popular culture, as well as about the possible arbitrariness in the construction of boundaries between the forms, categories and terms of popular narrative. The analysis of the aesthetic and industrial development of the comicbook, for example, and the changing definition of a superhero raises questions about the social and political status of the image of a hero, even leading to reflections about current critical unease about the politics of heroic narratives[1] and the multiple concept of masculinity.[2] More immediately apparent, an examination of contemporary graphic novels reveals both changes from and continuities with the "classic" superhero texts from the past, and even with the pulp fiction which served as the source of the old superhero comics. In addition, there are also traces of account from old legends and myths, as well as anecdotes and citations from modern songs, news reports, and media celebrities. The manipulation of familiarity and difference between the various texts and images in comicbooks, highlights the fact that genre is a mobile category rather than a repeated enactment of any static criteria. The boundaries of generic purity cannot be clearly drawn within popular narratives like sequential art which are located within industrial and commercial contexts that are constantly developing and shifting. The diversity and fragmentation apparent in comicbooks, in terms of intertextuality as well as with reference to the chaotic visual devices increasingly utilized in them, have central significance in the functioning of the medium as a popular form. In their hybridity, comicbooks participate in a postmodernist landscape of contemporary life: a kaleidescopic landscape of uncertain directions and contradictory images where changes are not to be easily labelled and appraised, and events and experiences can no longer be explained in simple, binary oppositions. Constantly surrounded by an almost eclectic medley of fragmented images, it is difficult, maybe unwise, to ignore the appropriateness of the mixed media aspect that popular forms employ to compose a response. It is increasingly difficult to be immune to the rush of movies, television, radio, videos, newspapers, advertisements, comicbooks, department store window displays, T-shirts, grafitti, and other fragments that make up our culture of immediacy. The study of popular media and entertainment is the kind of cultural study, or at least cultural awareness and apprehension, in which the interpreter is a part of what is studied. The study of immediate and popular culture is therefore not so much an objective witnessing, marred by personal involvement, as it is an introspection and a witnessing intricately paired. Such eclecticism and allowance for personal involvement appeals to someone like me who is trained in literary criticism within the university, but also very prone to a descriptive, empirical and generally non-theoretical sensibility.

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[1] In relation to the attending politics of heroic narratives, there are interesting studies about the revival of the action/adventure film and the new visibility of the muscular male body in the 1980s in relation to the figure of the hero as a parody or an endorsement of tough masculinity. See, among others, Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies. Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema.* London and New York: Routledge, 1993; David Buxton, *From the Avengers to Miami Vice,* Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989; and S. Cohen and I. R. Hark, *Screening the Male*, London: Routledge, 1993; and R. Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, New York: Columbia UP, 1986).

[2] Masculinity has increasingly become a critically visible category as a variety of writers ponder upon issues of sexuality and gendered identities. See for example, Jane Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 1990; and Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, London: Routledge, 1989, among others.

There is sometimes a tendency in academic or scholarly pursuits to specialize and keep the work pure and uncontaminated in an effort to maintain or renovate a vision which validates the profession. But my own preference is toward more contamination. I belong to the increasing batch of researchers that have been nurtured on movies, comicbooks, trash fiction, rock and roll, as well as the classics and whatever else was accessible, not being able to or not wanting to reject the disparities in many things that nurtured me. I believe that character and personality will always mediate language and experience. Therefore, I must acknowledge a personal perspective as the amateur connection in the interpretation of comicbooks as an artistic form, as well as a reading which situates it in the complex urban world where it thrives. My urge was to express an empathy and sympathy for what had been usually considered as anomalies and contradictions in culture and art, and not be limited by the roster of high art and classics recommended by a more impersonal and rational method of traditional criticism. I have no formal training in the analysis of culture, nor do I know any theory of culture deeply enough to be willing or be able to adopt a systematic view of its nature. My credentials for writing on popular culture and comicbooks are roughly equivalent to anyone else's: I live in today's world and delight in participating in, as well as being a spectator to, this fast-paced culture of immediacy with its fragmented and ever-shifting landscapes punctuated by the clever recycling of familiar images and sounds.

Comics seem to be a medium whose time has come in that they are capable of fulfilling certain entertainment preferences that novels and films cannot. Comics are ideally suited for our society where there is a strong visual bias, where fewer people read novels. This is a sweeping generalization, but it is highly probable that the broad mass of the population is less attracted to novels due to the lack of attendant images. Television and cinema, meanwhile, are limited by their running time: because an audience is trapped by this, there are upper limits on how much one can fit into a film, limits that do not hold for novels. Because of this nature, films and television cannot approach the depth and complexity that a novel could. Comics combine the best of the two:

comicbooks or graphic novels can get an incredible amount of density within their pages, and at the same time, can have a very attractive free-flowing track, offering visual and textual impressions in small, bite-size pieces appropriate to an audience dealing with a fast-paced culture. It is regrettable, but people seem to have a resistance to sitting down and spending a couple of evenings reading a novel. But in a comicbook like *Watchmen*, with its combination of words and images, it is possible to receive as much information as from half a fair-sized book in 20 to 30 minutes. Comics seem to have a number of advantages that are becoming apparent and suited to today's preferences and needs for entertainment and information. With the steady international increase of quality comicbooks, especially in Europe, Japan and North America, I believe that comics, which have been in the shadow of novels, television and film for a long time, are now finally starting to break out and to chart new creative territory and do things that only comics can do, and do better than films or books.

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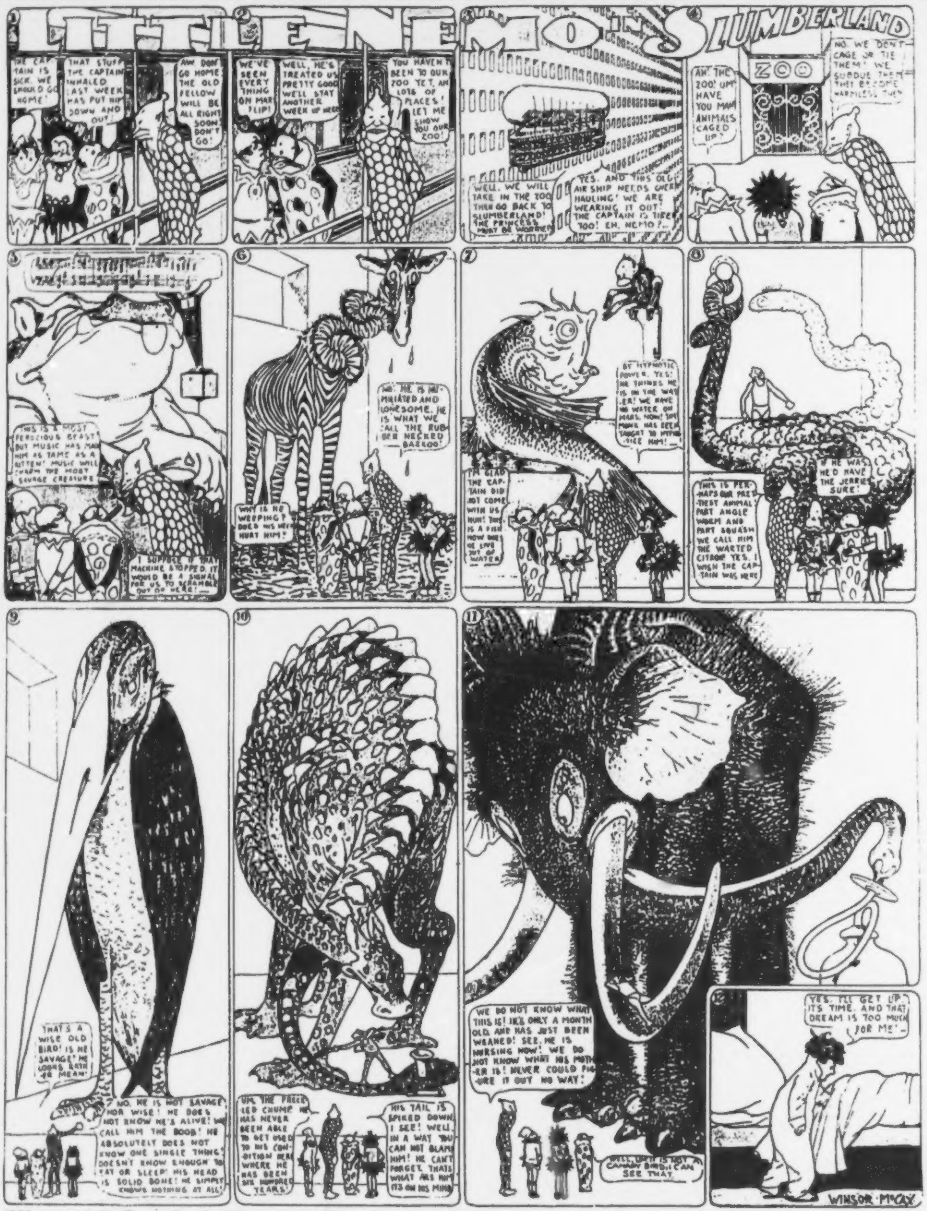
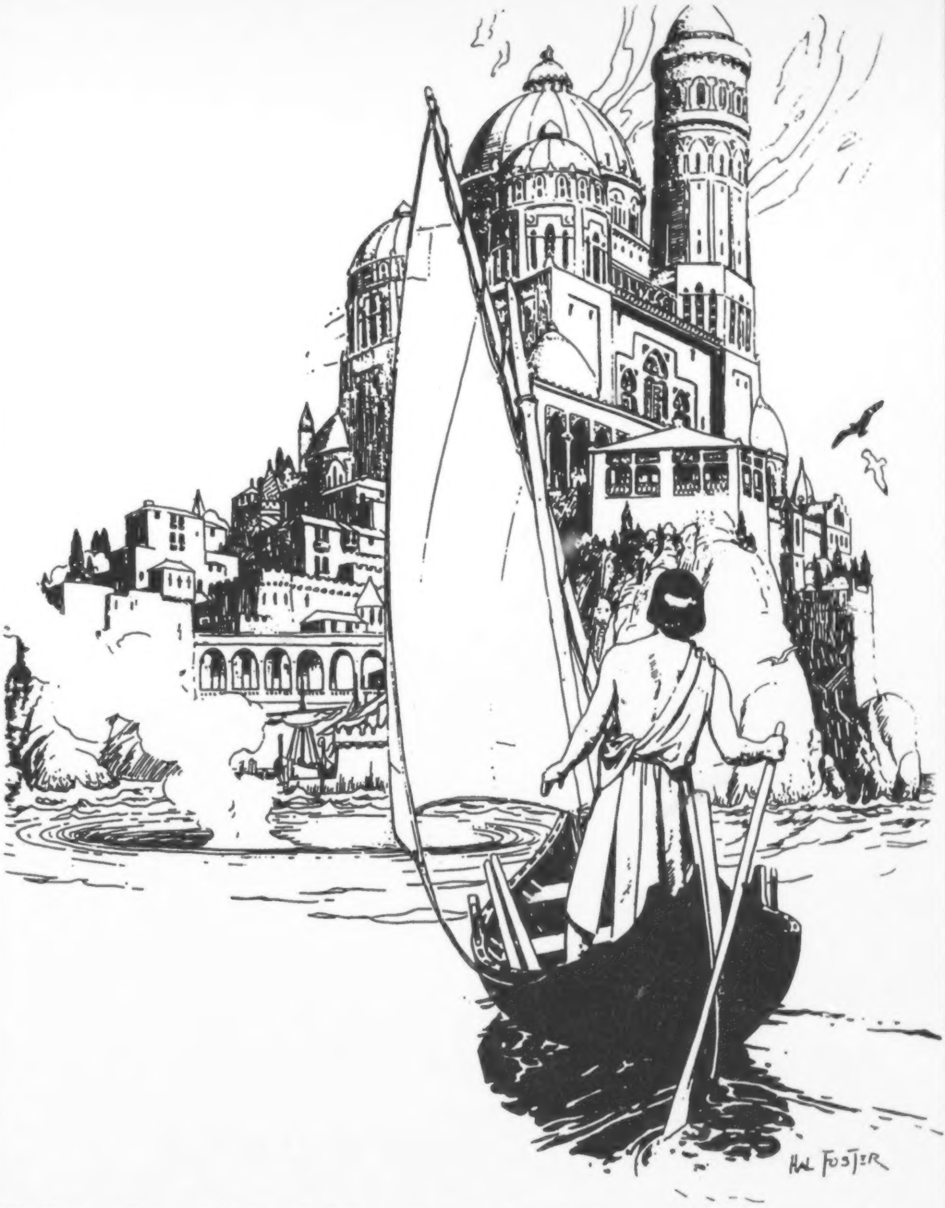
APPENDICES


LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND
THE CAPTAIN IS SICK. WE SHOULD GO HOME!
THAT STUFF THE CAPTAIN INHALED LAST WEEK HAS PUT HIM DOWN AND OUT!
AW DON'T GO HOME! THE OLD FELLOW WILL BE ALL RIGHT SOON! DON'T GO!
WE'VE SEEN EVERYTHING ON MARS, FLIP!
WELL, HE'S TREATED US PRETTY GOOD! WE'LL STAY ANOTHER WEEK UP HERE
YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TO OUR ZOO YET, AN' LOTS OF PLACES! LET ME SHOW YOU OUR ZOO!
WELL, WE WILL TAKE IN THE ZOO THEN GO BACK TO SLUMBERLAND! THE PRINCESS MUST BE WORRIED
YES. AND THIS OLD AIRSHIP NEEDS OVERHAULING! WE ARE WEARING IT OUT! THE CAPTAIN IS TIRED TOO! EH, NEMO?..
ZOO
AH! THE ZOO! UM! HAVE YOU MANY ANIMALS CAGED UP?
NO, WE DON'T CAGE OR TIE THEM! WE SUBDUE THEM! THEY BECOME HARMLESS THEN
THIS IS A MOST FEROCIOUS BEAST! BUT MUSIC HAS MADE HIM AS TAME AS A KITTEN! MUSIC WILL CHARM THE MOST SAVAGE CREATURE
I SUPPOSE IF THAT MACHINE STOPPED, IT WOULD BE A SIGNAL FOR US TO SCRAMBLE OUT OF HERE!
WHY IS HE WEEPING? DOES HIS NECK HURT HIM?
NO. HE IS HUMILIATED AND LONESOME. HE IS WHAT WE CALL THE RUBBER NECKED BAZROO!
BY HYPNOTIC POWER, YES! HE THINKS HE IS IN THE WATER! WE HAVE NO WATER ON MARS. NOW! THE MONK HAS BEEN TAUGHT TO HYPNOTIZE HIM!
I'M GLAD THE CAPTAIN DID NOT COME WITH US. HUH! THIS IS A FISH. HOW DOES HE LIVE OUT OF WATER
THIS IS PERHAPS OUR PRETTIEST ANIMAL. PART ANGLE WORM AND PART SQUASH. WE CALL HIM THE WARTED CITROW. YES, I WISH THE CAPTAIN WAS HERE
IF HE WAS, HE'D HAVE THE JERRIES SURE!
THAT'S A WISE OLD BIRD! IS HE SAVAGE? HE LOOKS RATHER MEAN!
NO, HE IS NOT SAVAGE NOR WISE! HE DOES NOT KNOW HE'S ALIVE! WE CALL HIM THE BOOB! HE ABSOLUTELY DOES NOT KNOW ONE SINGLE THING! DOESN'T KNOW ENOUGH TO EAT OR SLEEP! HIS HEAD IS SOLID BONE! HE SIMPLY KNOWS NOTHING AT ALL!
UM, THE FRECKLED CHUMP HE HAS NEVER BEEN ABLE TO GET USED TO HIS CONDITION HERE WHERE HE HAS BEEN SIX HUNDRED YEARS!
HIS TAIL IS SPIKED DOWN, I SEE! WELL, IN A WAY YOU CAN NOT BLAME HIM! HE CAN'T FORGET. THAT'S WHAT AILS HIM. IT'S ON HIS MIND
WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT THIS IS! IT'S ONLY A MONTH OLD AND HAS JUST BEEN WEANED! SEE, HE IS NURSING NOW! WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HIS MOTHER IS! NEVER COULD FIGURE IT OUT NO WAY!
YES. I'LL GET UP. IT'S TIME. AND THAT DREAM IS TOO MUCH FOR ME!
WINSOR McCAY

(Winsor McCay, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. NY: Nostalgia Press, 1974: 241)

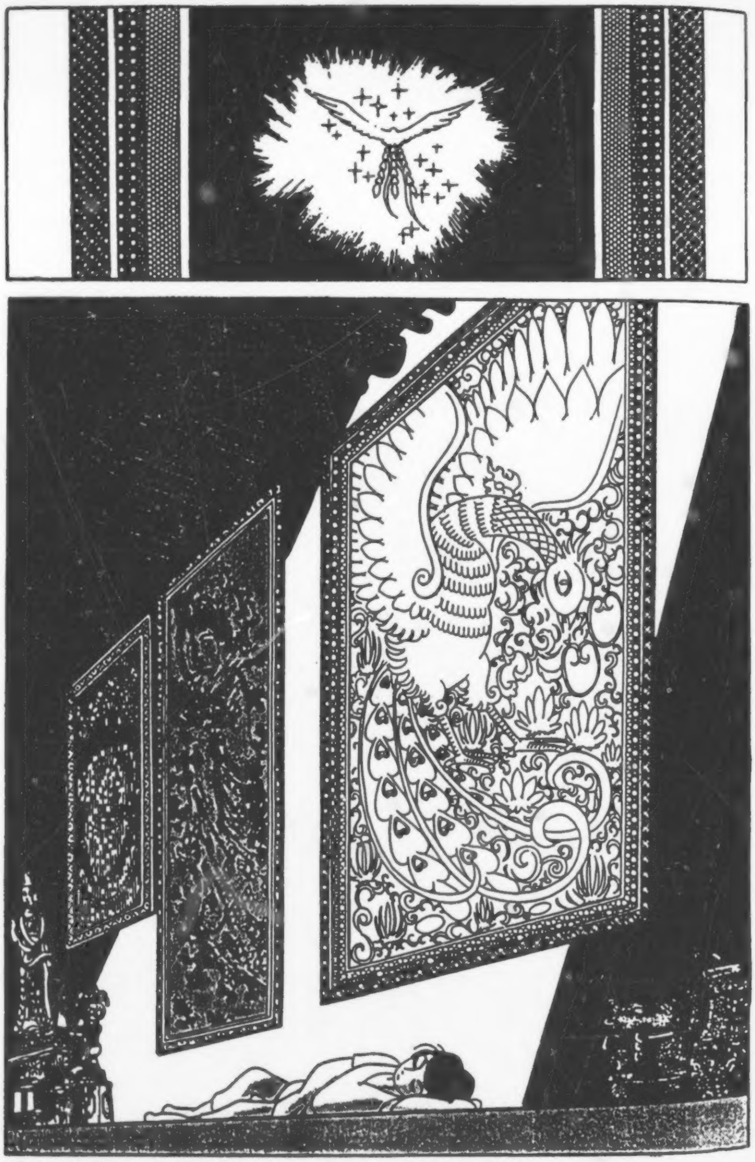
Winsor McCay is well known for his graphic fantasy art throughout the United States and Europe. *Little Nemo* is, so far, the only comic strip ever honored by a full-fledged exhibit in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.



(Hal Foster, *Prince Valiant* in R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs 1972: 229)

Hal Foster follows in the tradition of great illustrators. In pages such as this one, the text clearly plays a secondary role to the imagery.

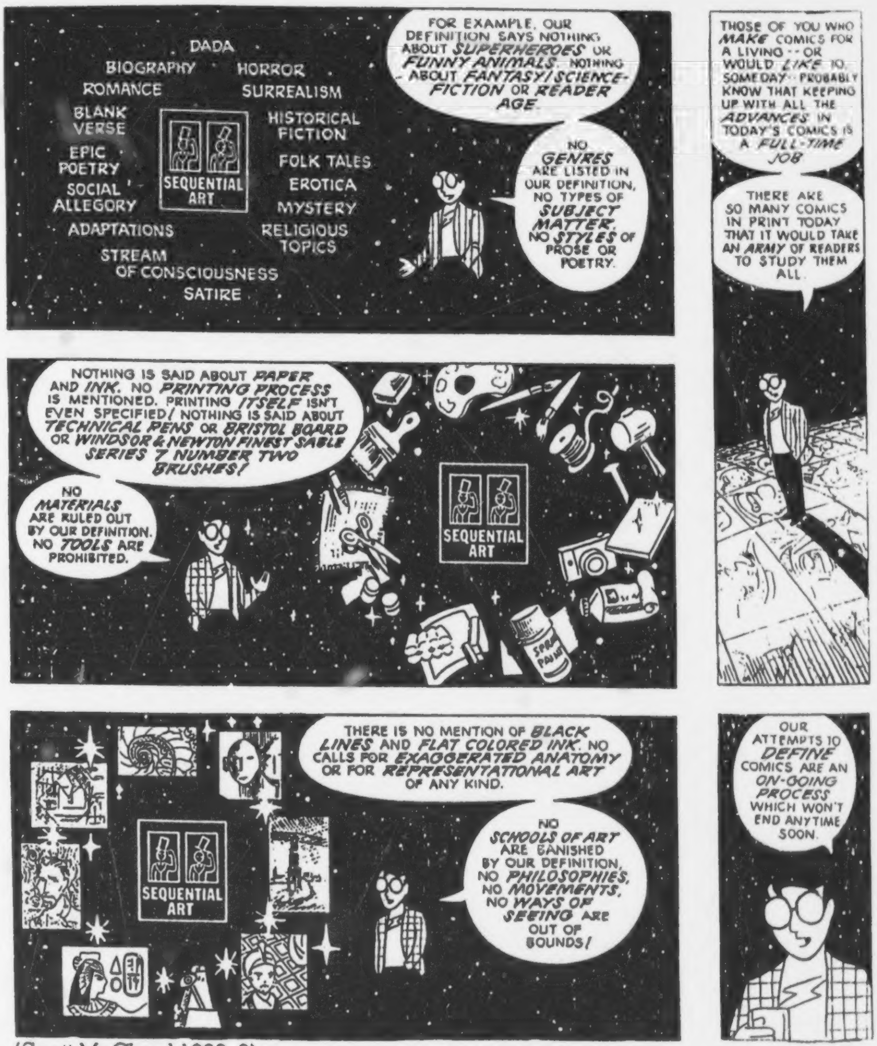
Appendix 2



(Goseki Kojima, *The Phoenix* in Shodt 1988: 184)

In Japanese comic books, there are some which go for 20-30 pages without any text or dialogue.

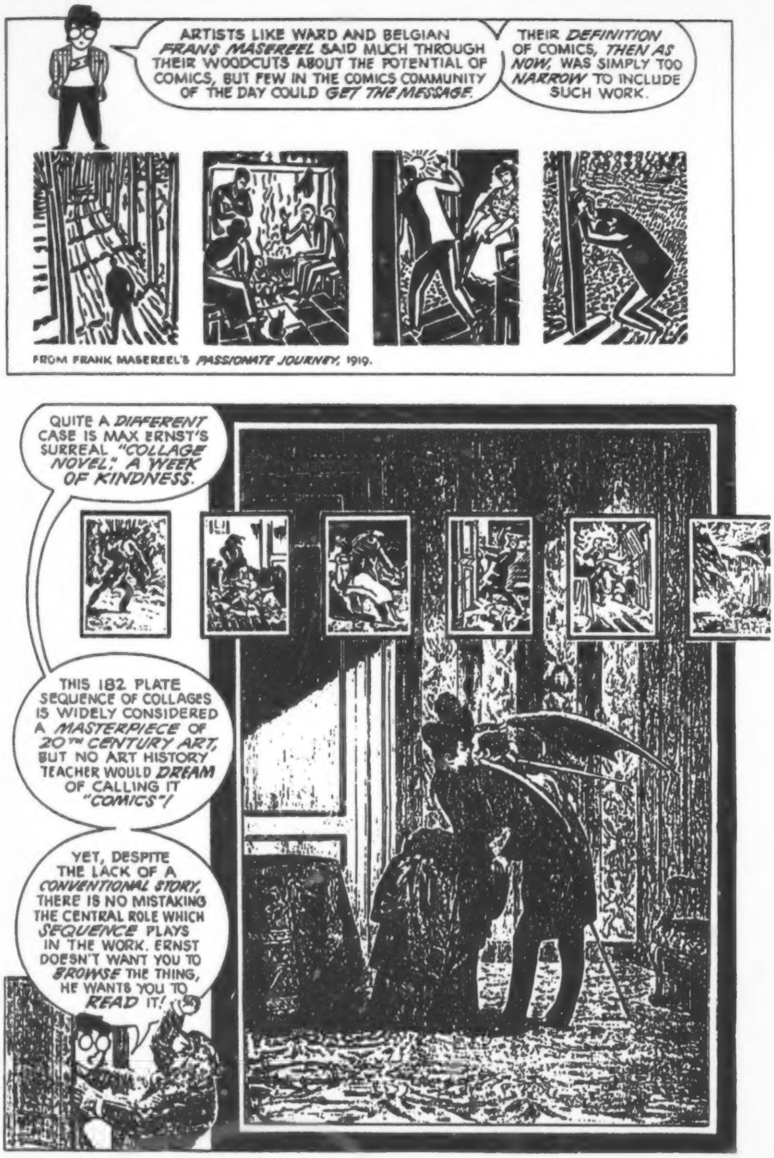
Appendix 3


DADA
BIOGRAPHY
HORROR
ROMANCE
SURREALISM
BLANK VERSE
HISTORICAL FICTION
EPIC POETRY
FOLK TALES
SOCIAL ALLEGORY
EROTICA
MYSTERY
ADAPTATIONS
RELIGIOUS TOPICS
STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS
SATIRE
SEQUENTIAL ART
FOR EXAMPLE, OUR DEFINITION SAYS NOTHING ABOUT SUPERHEROES OR FUNNY ANIMALS. NOTHING ABOUT FANTASY/SCIENCE-FICTION OR READER AGE.
NO GENRES ARE LISTED IN OUR DEFINITION, NO TYPES OF SUBJECT MATTER, NO STYLES OF PROSE OR POETRY.
THOSE OF YOU WHO MAKE COMICS FOR A LIVING -- OR WOULD LIKE TO, SOMEDAY -- PROBABLY KNOW THAT KEEPING UP WITH ALL THE ADVANCES IN TODAY'S COMICS IS A FULL-TIME JOB
THERE ARE SO MANY COMICS IN PRINT TODAY THAT IT WOULD TAKE AN ARMY OF READERS TO STUDY THEM ALL.
NOTHING IS SAID ABOUT PAPER AND INK. NO PRINTING PROCESS IS MENTIONED. PRINTING ITSELF ISN'T EVEN SPECIFIED! NOTHING IS SAID ABOUT TECHNICAL PENS OR BRISTOL BOARD OR WINDSOR & NEWTON FINEST SABLE SERIES 7 NUMBER TWO BRUSHES!
NO MATERIALS ARE RULED OUT BY OUR DEFINITION. NO TOOLS ARE PROHIBITED.
SEQUENTIAL ART
SPRAY PAINT
THERE IS NO MENTION OF BLACK LINES AND FLAT COLORED INK. NO CALLS FOR EXAGGERATED ANATOMY OR FOR REPRESENTATIONAL ART OF ANY KIND.
SEQUENTIAL ART
NO SCHOOLS OF ART ARE BANISHED BY OUR DEFINITION, NO PHILOSOPHIES, NO MOVEMENTS, NO WAYS OF SEEING ARE OUT OF BOUNDS!
OUR ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE COMICS ARE AN ON-GOING PROCESS WHICH WON'T END ANYTIME SOON.

(Scott McCloud 1993: 2)

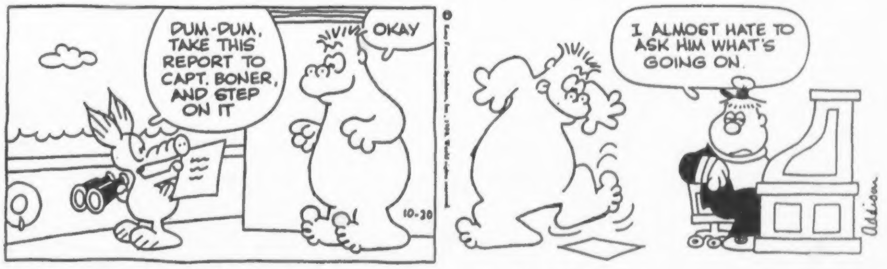
Definition must be neutral in terms of topic, styles of illustration, process of production, schools of art, and so on.

Appendix 4


ARTISTS LIKE WARD AND BELGIAN FRANS MASEREEL SAID MUCH THROUGH THEIR WOODCUTS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL OF COMICS, BUT FEW IN THE COMICS COMMUNITY OF THE DAY COULD GET THE MESSAGE.
THEIR DEFINITION OF COMICS, THEN AS NOW, WAS SIMPLY TOO NARROW TO INCLUDE SUCH WORK.
FROM FRANK MASEREEL'S PASSIONATE JOURNEY, 1919.
QUITE A DIFFERENT CASE IS MAX ERNST'S SURREAL "COLLAGE NOVEL," A WEEK OF KINDNESS.
THIS 182 PLATE SEQUENCE OF COLLAGES IS WIDELY CONSIDERED A MASTERPIECE OF 20TH CENTURY ART, BUT NO ART HISTORY TEACHER WOULD DREAM OF CALLING IT "COMICS"!
YET, DESPITE THE LACK OF A CONVENTIONAL STORY, THERE IS NO MISTAKING THE CENTRAL ROLE WHICH SEQUENCE PLAYS IN THE WORK. ERNST DOESN'T WANT YOU TO BROWSE THE THING, HE WANTS YOU TO READ IT!

(Scott McCloud 1993: 19)

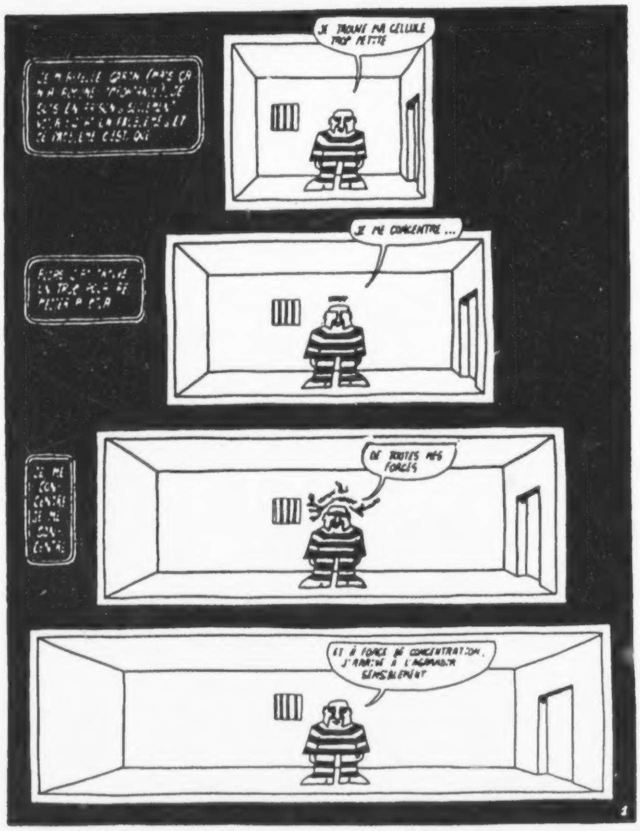
Essential in conceptualizing comics is the idea of its being a "sequential art"--not simply a visual stimulant but something that must be "read."


DUM-DUM, TAKE THIS REPORT TO CAPT. BONER, AND STEP ON IT
OKAY
10-30
I ALMOST HATE TO ASK HIM WHAT'S GOING ON.
Addison

(Addison, *Boner's Ark* in R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs 1972: 57)

This strip exemplifies a word-picture play to carry the gag or joke.

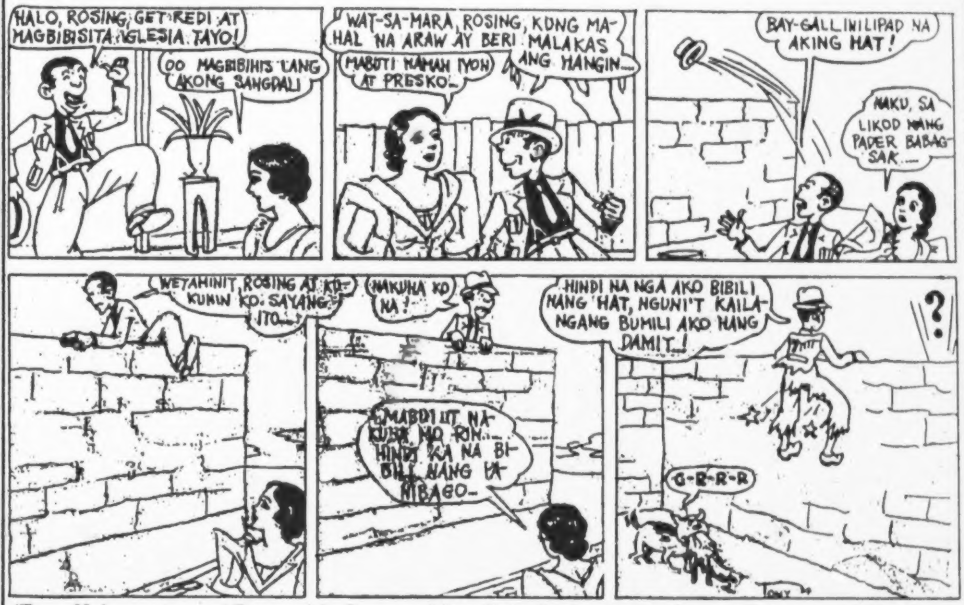
Appendix 6


JE TROUVE MA CELLULE TROP PETITE
JE ME CONCENTRE ...
JE ME CON-CENTRE JE ME CON-CENTRE
DE TOUTES MES FORCES
ET À FORCE DE CONCENTRATION, J'ARRIVE À L'AGRANDIR SENSIBLEMENT
1

(Leconte, "La prison, de plus en plus," *Pilote 589* in Fresnault-Deruelle 1977: 61)

This strip is another example of how the play between image and text is artfully manipulated by the artist. The size of the prison grows in correspondence to the mental world of the character.

Appendix 7

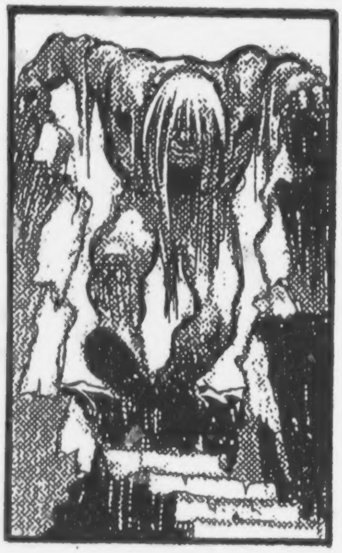

HALO, ROSING, GET REDI AT MAGBIBISITA IGLESIA TAYO!
OO MAGBIBIHIS LANG AKONG SANGDALI
WAT-SA-MARA, ROSING, KUNG MAHAL NA ARAW AY BERI MALAKAS ANG HANGIN...
MABUTI NAMAN IYON AT PRESKO...
BAY-GALL INILIPAD NA AKING HAT!
NAKU, SA LIKOD NANG PADER BABAGSAK...
WETAMINIT ROSING AT KUKUNIN KO. SAYANG ITO...
NAKUHA KO NA!
MABUTI AT NAKUHA MO RIN... HINDI KA NA BIBILI NANG [illegible]BAGO...
HINDI NA NGA AKO BIBILI NANG HAT, NGUNI'T KAILANGANG BUMILI AKO NANG DAMIT...!
?
G-R-R-R
TONY

(Tony Velasquez and Romualdo Ramos, *Mga Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy* in C. Roxas 1976: 20)

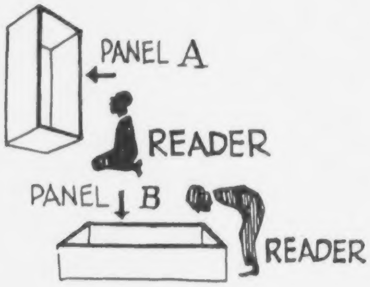
The social status suggested by Kenkoy's clothes, which only the rich and usually only mestizos could afford to wear, is contradicted by his speech. Those who could afford to wear this get-up could also afford to attend private schools, and thus speak proper English. Kenkoy's broken English, "Get redi," "Wat-sa-Mara?" and "Wetaminit" (for Get ready, What's the matter, and Wait a minute) belies his outward appearance.

Appendix 8

Panel A

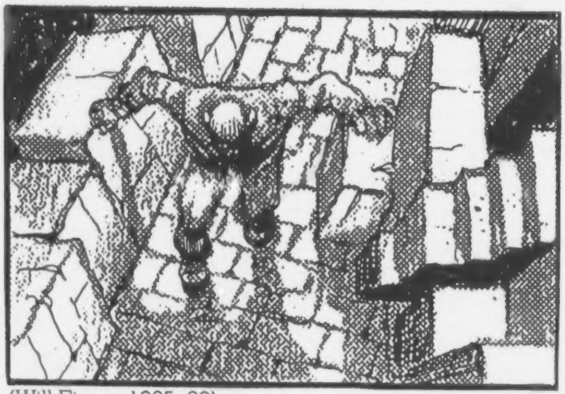


In this example the oblong shape of the panel combined with the 'worm's eye' view from below evokes a sense of threat. The reader feels confined and dominated by the monster.



The same scene but viewed from 'a bird's eye' view from above and set in a wide panel stimulates the sense of detachment. The reader has plenty of elbow room and above it all. There is little threat or involvement.

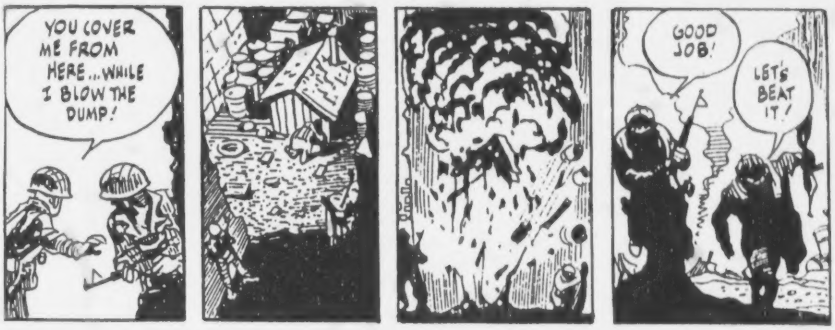
Panel B.



(Will Eisner 1985: 90)

The shape of the panel and the use of perspective within it can be manipulated to produce various emotional states in the viewer. Above, Will Eisner expounds on certain ways a comics artist can tactically control the reader's reaction.

Appendix 9


YOU COVER ME FROM HERE...WHILE I BLOW THE DUMP!
GOOD JOB!
LET'S BEAT IT!

In this panel a flat eye-level view informs the reader of details such as the commanding action of the soldier's hand.

In this panel an over-head view is necessary to give the reader a clear uninvolved view of the setting and the events to follow.

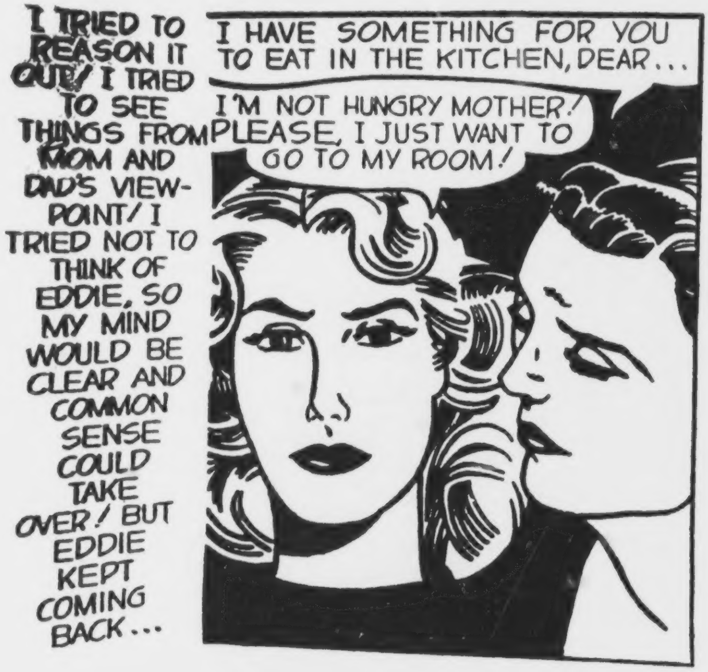
In this panel the reader is placed on ground level to involve him so that the impact of the explosion can be 'felt.'

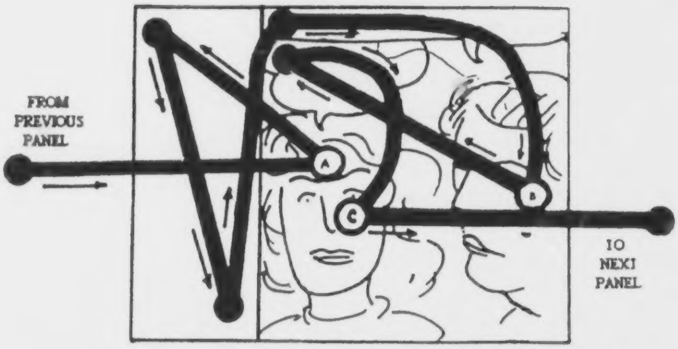
In this view the reader's perspective is lowered to a worm's eye-view for involvement in the action.

(Will Eisner 1985: 89)

The primary function of perspective should be to manipulate the reader's orientation for a purpose in accord with the author's narrative plan. For example, accurate perspective is imperative when the sense of the story requires that the reader knows precisely where all the elements of a drama are in relation to each other. One of the most respected comics artist in the US, Will Eisner provides some tips on how perspective may be used to direct the reader's involvement in the unfolding of the narrative.

Appendix 10


I TRIED TO REASON IT OUT! I TRIED TO SEE THINGS FROM MOM AND DAD'S VIEWPOINT! I TRIED NOT TO THINK OF EDDIE, SO MY MIND WOULD BE CLEAR AND COMMON SENSE COULD TAKE OVER! BUT EDDIE KEPT COMING BACK...
I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU TO EAT IN THE KITCHEN, DEAR...
I'M NOT HUNGRY MOTHER! PLEASE, I JUST WANT TO GO TO MY ROOM!

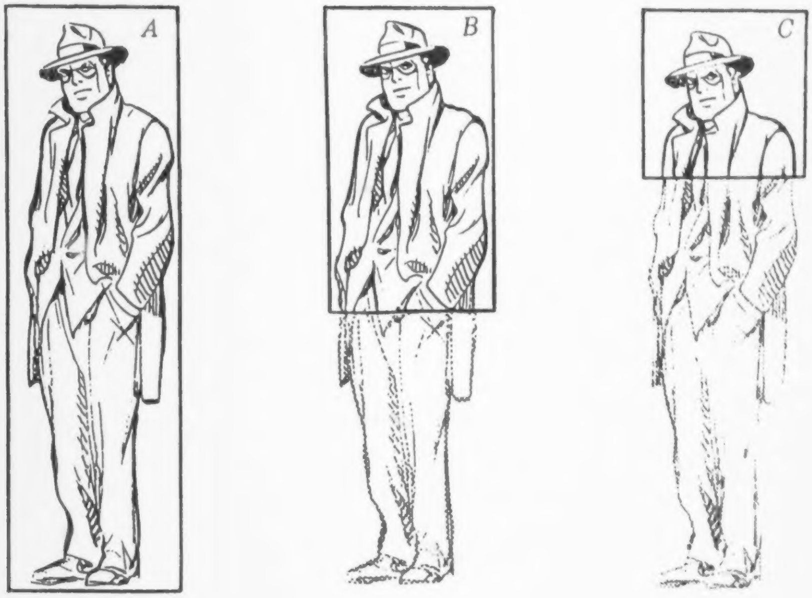


A schematic drawing of likely eye movements for the *Eddie Diptych*.

(L. Abbott 1986: 160-161)

Laurence Abbott shows how the textual and pictorial elements have been ordered in this example so that the most coherent pattern of perception also follows the most natural movement of the eye, even directing the reader onward to the next panel.

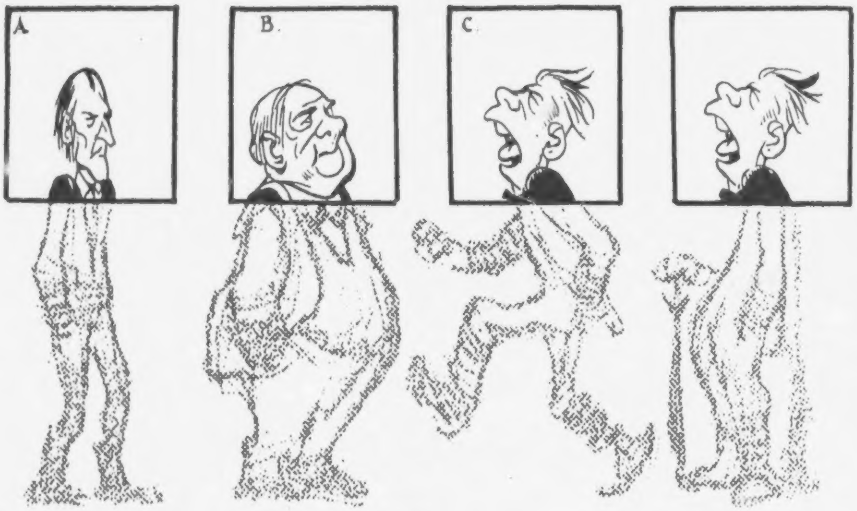
Appendix 11



FULL FIGURE MEDIUM CLOSE-UP
(Eisner 1985: 42)

The art of panelization may be seen in Eisner's simple example using a single figure. When the Figure is shown complete and intact (A), no sophistication is required of the reader. In Panel B, the reader is expected to understand what is excluded and to complete it in proportion to the torso and comparable to its position. Panel C is a close-up, and the reader must assume an entire body and, based on experience and memory, must supply the rest of the picture in conformity with what the physiology of the head suggests.

Appendix 12



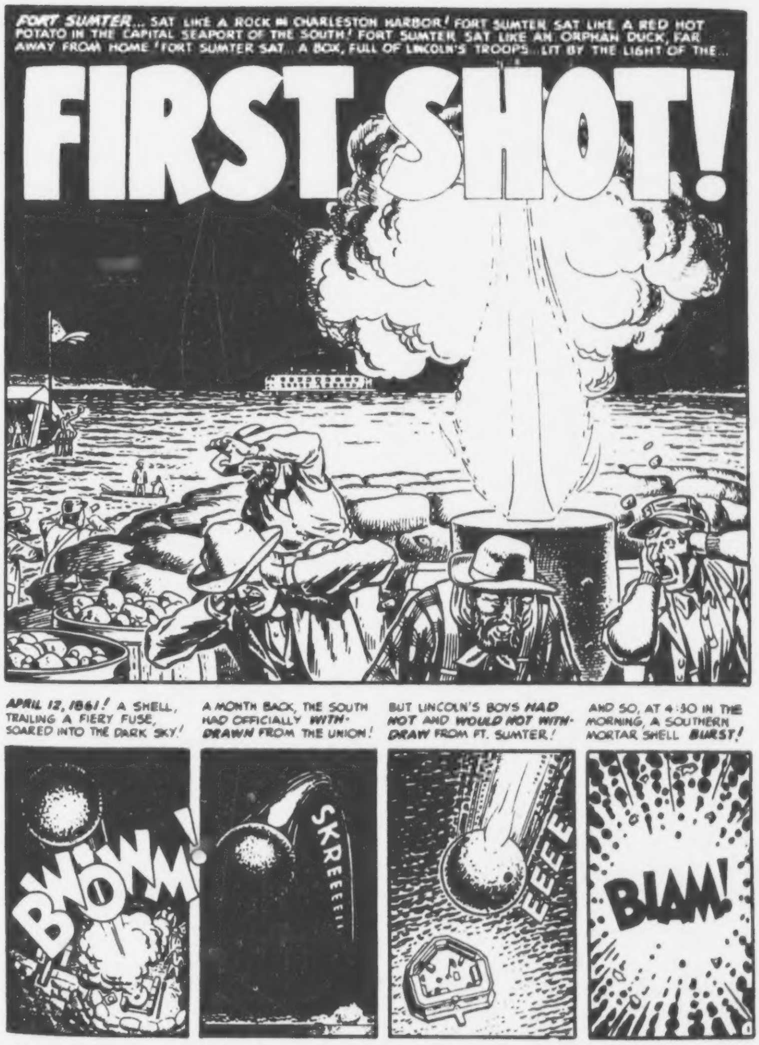
The slim head (A) implies a slim body.

The fat head (B) implies a fat body.

(Eisner 1985: 43)

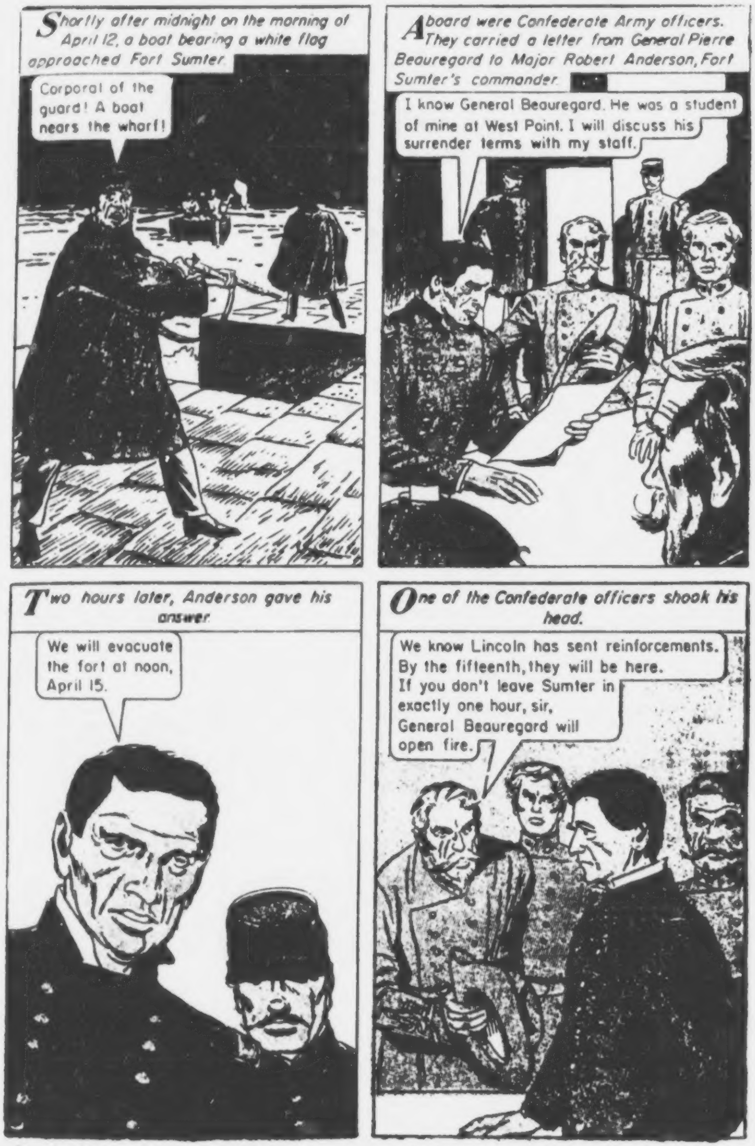
A "visual dialogue" between the reader and the artist requires certain assumptions growing out of a common level of experience, as may be seen in the series of panels above where the frames encompass only the head.
Subsequent views of the characters will substantiate these asssumptions. Illustration C, however, serves to demonstrate that there can be a misreading of the artist's intentions unless a more skilled drawing is executed in the panel itself or a prior panel has established what it is the reader is viewing.

Appendix 13


FORT SUMTER... SAT LIKE A ROCK IN CHARLESTON HARBOR! FORT SUMTER SAT LIKE A RED HOT POTATO IN THE CAPITAL SEAPORT OF THE SOUTH! FORT SUMTER SAT LIKE AN ORPHAN DUCK, FAR AWAY FROM HOME! FORT SUMTER SAT... A BOX, FULL OF LINCOLN'S TROOPS... LIT BY THE LIGHT OF THE...
FIRST SHOT!
APRIL 12, 1861! A SHELL, TRAILING A FIERY FUSE, SOARED INTO THE DARK SKY!
A MONTH BACK, THE SOUTH HAD OFFICIALLY WITHDRAWN FROM THE UNION!
BUT LINCOLN'S BOYS HAD NOT AND WOULD NOT WITHDRAW FROM FT. SUMTER!
AND SO, AT 4:30 IN THE MORNING, A SOUTHERN MORTAR SHELL BURST!
BWOWM!
SKREEEEEE
EEEE
BLAM!

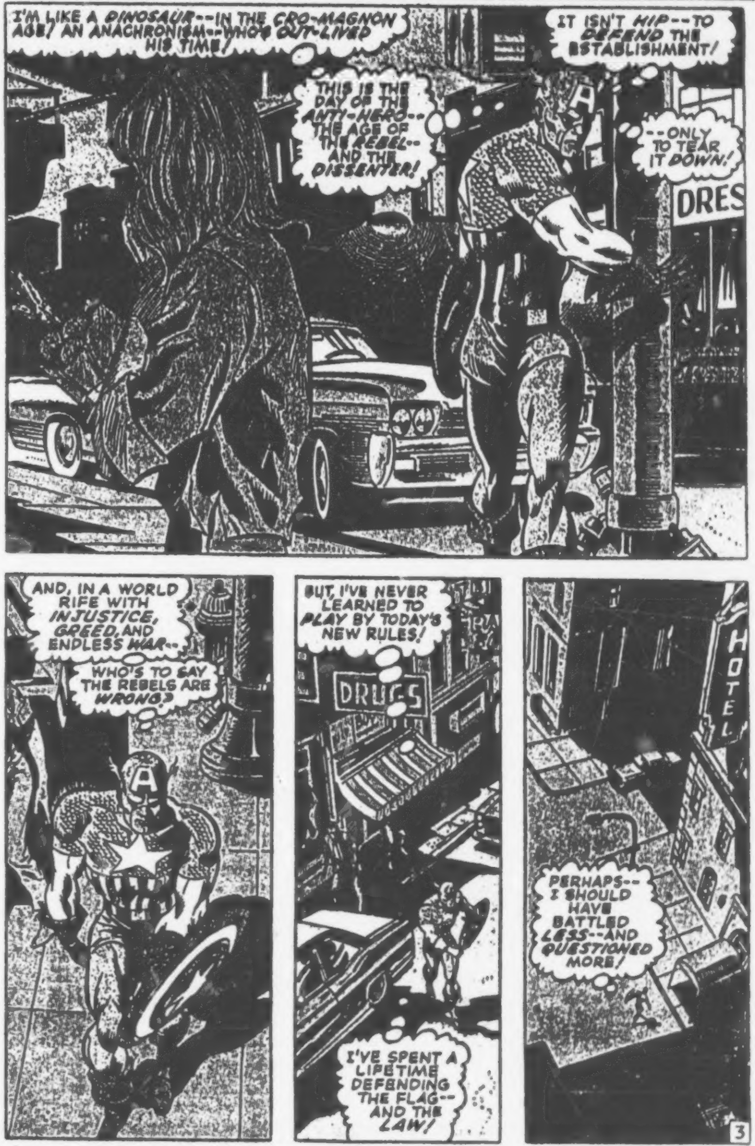
(Harvey Kurtzman, John Severin, and Will Elder, *First Shot*, 1980: 1)

Appendix 14


Shortly after midnight on the morning of April 12, a boat bearing a white flag approached Fort Sumter.
Corporal of the guard! A boat nears the wharf!
Aboard were Confederate Army officers. They carried a letter from General Pierre Beauregard to Major Robert Anderson, Fort Sumter's commander.
I know General Beauregard. He was a student of mine at West Point. I will discuss his surrender terms with my staff.
Two hours later, Anderson gave his answer.
We will evacuate the fort at noon, April 15.
One of the Confederate officers shook his head.
We know Lincoln has sent reinforcements. By the fifteenth, they will be here. If you don't leave Sumter in exactly one hour, sir, General Beauregard will open fire.

(Jack Kirby, *April, 1861: Fort Sumter* in Witek 1993: 56)

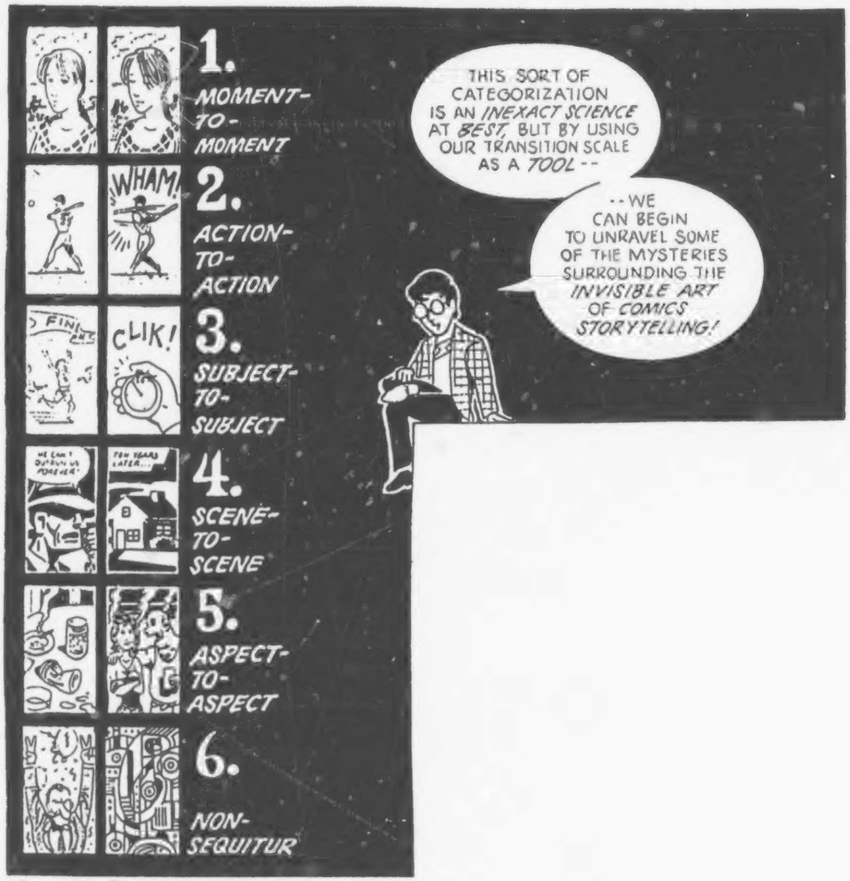
Appendix 15


I'M LIKE A DINOSAUR--IN THE CRO-MAGNON AGE! AN ANACHRONISM--WHO'S OUT-LIVED HIS TIME!
THIS IS THE DAY OF THE ANTI-HERO--THE AGE OF THE REBEL--AND THE DISSENTER!
IT ISN'T HIP--TO DEFEND THE ESTABLISHMENT!
--ONLY TO TEAR IT DOWN!
DRES
AND, IN A WORLD RIFE WITH INJUSTICE, GREED, AND ENDLESS WAR--
WHO'S TO SAY THE REBELS ARE WRONG?
BUT, I'VE NEVER LEARNED TO PLAY BY TODAY'S NEW RULES!
DRUGS
I'VE SPENT A LIFETIME DEFENDING THE FLAG--AND THE LAW!
HOTEL
PERHAPS--I SHOULD HAVE BATTLED LESS--AND QUESTIONED MORE!
3

(G. Colan and J. Sinnott, *Captain America* in R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs 1976: 113)

The musings of Captain America--the most patriotic superhero--provide the background by which the readers are directed to interpret the narrative.
Brooding superheroes did not become common until the mid-1960s.

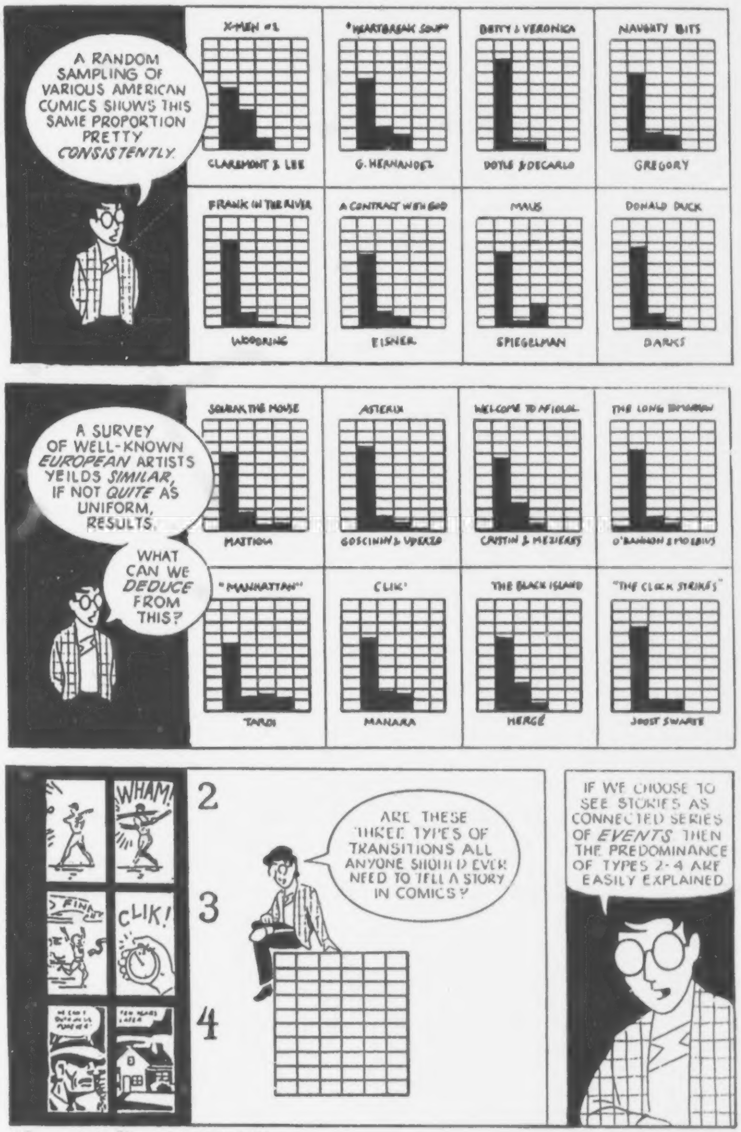
Appendix 16


1. MOMENT-TO-MOMENT
WHAM!
2. ACTION-TO-ACTION
CLIK!
3. SUBJECT-TO-SUBJECT
4. SCENE-TO-SCENE
5. ASPECT-TO-ASPECT
6. NON-SEQUITUR
THIS SORT OF CATEGORIZATION IS AN INEXACT SCIENCE AT BEST, BUT BY USING OUR TRANSITION SCALE AS A TOOL --
--WE CAN BEGIN TO UNRAVEL SOME OF THE MYSTERIES SURROUNDING THE INVISIBLE ART OF COMICS STORYTELLING!

(Scott McCloud 1993: 72-78)

McCloud has identified six kinds of transitional strategies used for creating a sequence in the "gutter," each one differing in the amount and range of leap in bridging the sense of one panel to another.

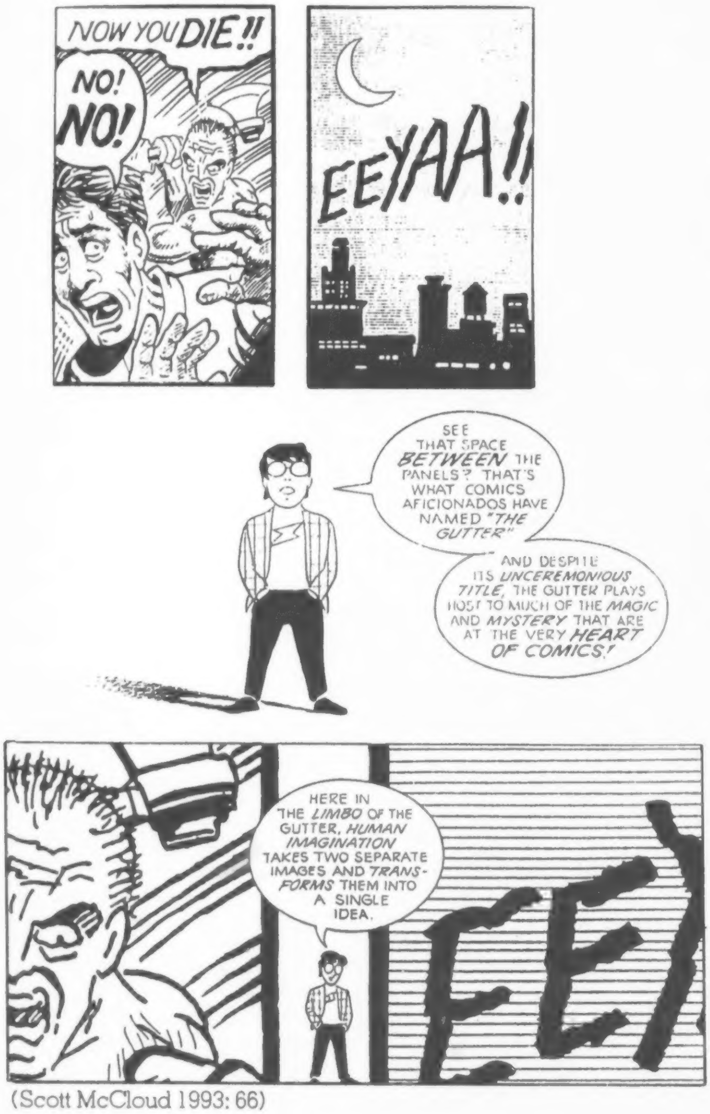
Appendix 17


A RANDOM SAMPLING OF VARIOUS AMERICAN COMICS SHOWS THIS SAME PROPORTION PRETTY *CONSISTENTLY.*
X-MEN #1
CLAREMONT & LEE
"HEARTBREAK SOUP"
G. HERNANDEZ
BETTY & VERONICA
DOYLE & DECARLO
NAUGHTY BITS
GREGORY
FRANK IN THE RIVER
WOODRING
A CONTRACT WITH GOD
EISNER
MAUS
SPIEGELMAN
DONALD DUCK
BARKS
A SURVEY OF WELL-KNOWN *EUROPEAN* ARTISTS YEILDS *SIMILAR,* IF NOT *QUITE* AS UNIFORM, RESULTS.
WHAT CAN WE *DEDUCE* FROM THIS?
SQUEAK THE MOUSE
MATTIOLI
ASTERIX
GOSCINNY & UDERZO
WELCOME TO ALFLOLOL
CHRISTIN & MEZIERES
THE LONG TOMORROW
O'BANNON & MOEBIUS
"MANHATTAN"
TARDI
CLIK'
MANARA
THE BLACK ISLAND
HERGÉ
"THE CLOCK STRIKES"
JOOST SWARTE
WHAM!
CLIK!
2
3
4
ARE THESE THREE TYPES OF TRANSITIONS ALL ANYONE SHOULD EVER NEED TO TELL A STORY IN COMICS?
IF WE CHOOSE TO SEE STORIES AS CONNECTED SERIES OF *EVENTS* THEN THE PREDOMINANCE OF TYPES 2-4 ARE EASILY EXPLAINED

(Scott McCloud 1993: 70)

The similarities in the proportion of the different transition strategies used in American and European comicbooks attest to the importance of the sequential progression in comic art, especially in the tendency of the transitions to fall within Types 2-4.

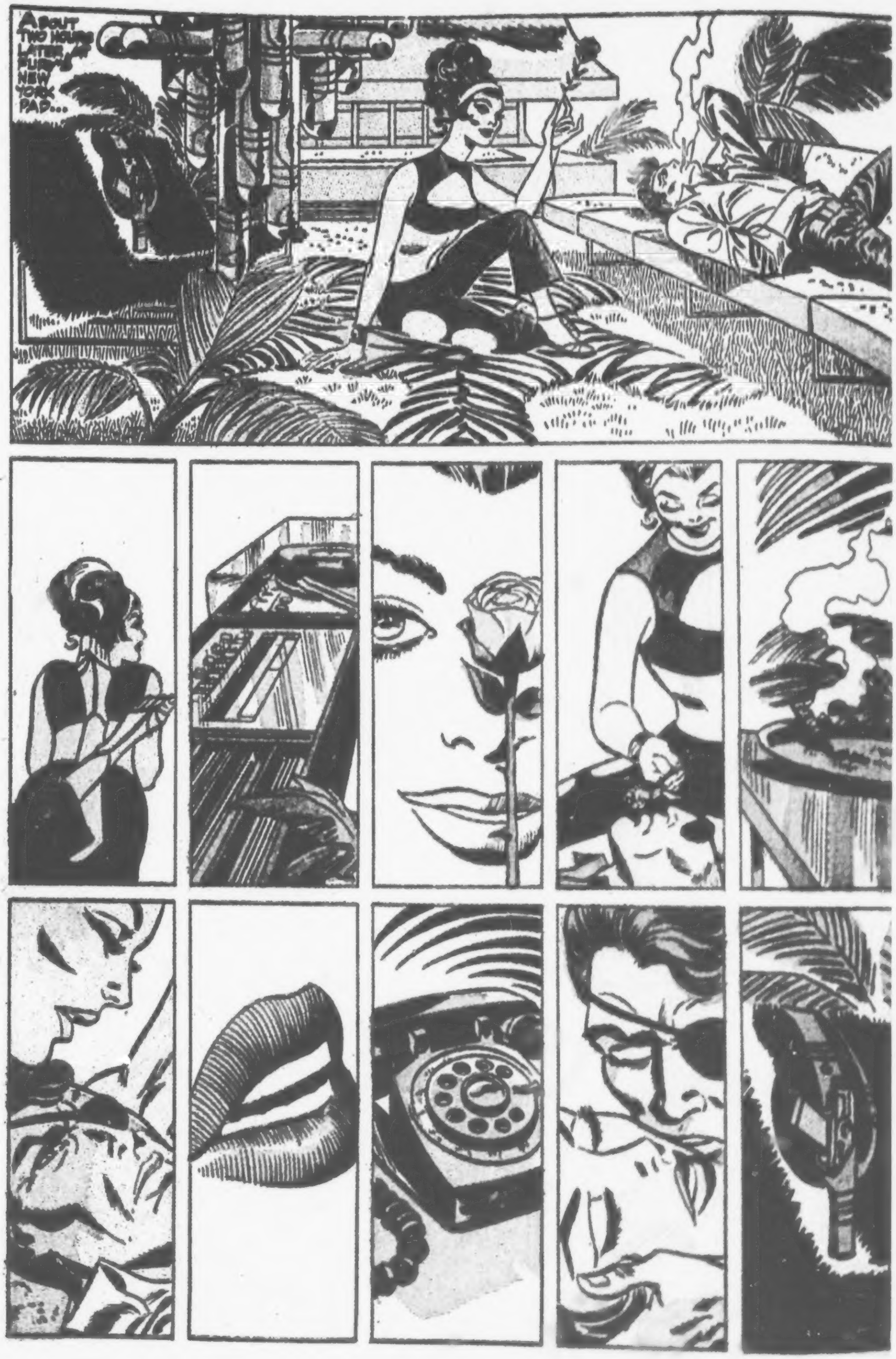
Appendix 18


NOW YOU DIE.!!
NO! NO!
EEYAA!!
SEE THAT SPACE BETWEEN THE PANELS? THAT'S WHAT COMICS AFICIONADOS HAVE NAMED "THE GUTTER"
AND DESPITE ITS UNCEREMONIOUS TITLE, THE GUTTER PLAYS HOST TO MUCH OF THE MAGIC AND MYSTERY THAT ARE AT THE VERY HEART OF COMICS!
HERE IN THE LIMBO OF THE GUTTER, HUMAN IMAGINATION TAKES TWO SEPARATE IMAGES AND TRANSFORMS THEM INTO A SINGLE IDEA.
EEY

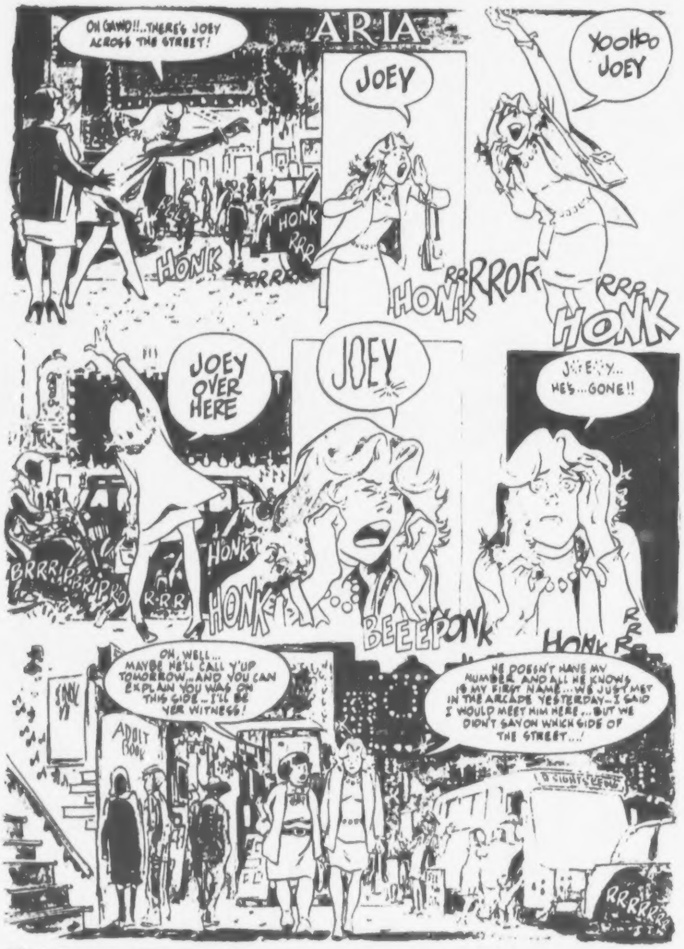
(Scott McCloud 1993: 66)

The reader makes the leap from one panel to another: here, one assumes that the sound in the second panel is somehow connected to the death threat of the first panel. The readers, in fact, KILL the man because the act is never shown at all.

Appendix 19


ABOUT TWO HOURS LATER AT FURY'S NEW YORK PAD...

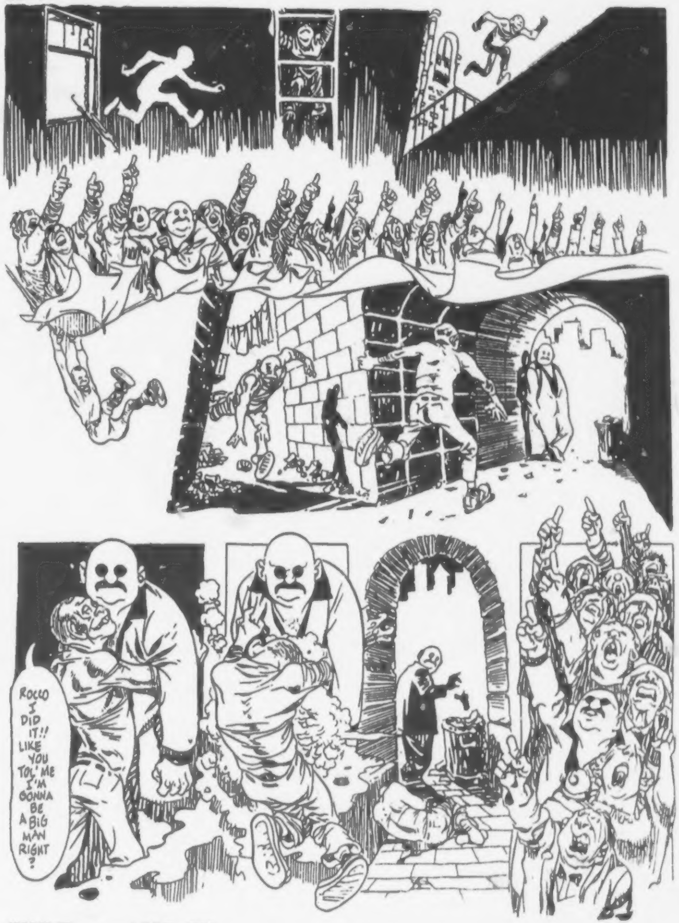
Appendix 20


ARIA
OH GAWD!!..THERE'S JOEY ACROSS THE STREET!
JOEY
YOOHOO JOEY
HONK
HONK
RRR
RRRR
HONK
RRRROR
RRR
HONK
JOEY OVER HERE
JOEY
JOEY... HE'S...GONE!!
BRRRIP BRKIP KO
K-R-R
HONK
HONK
BEEEPONK
HONK
RRR
OH, WELL... MAYBE HE'LL CALL Y'UP TOMORROW...AND YOU CAN EXPLAIN YOU WAS ON THIS SIDE...I'LL BE YER WITNESS!
HE DOESN'T HAVE MY NUMBER AND ALL HE KNOWS IS MY FIRST NAME...WE JUST MET IN THE ARCADE YESTERDAY...I SAID I WOULD MEET HIM HERE...BUT WE DIDN'T SAY ON WHICH SIDE OF THE STREET...!
ADULT BOOK
SIGHTSEEING
RRRRRRR

(Will Eisner, "The Big City," *SPIRIT* #35, June 1982)

Gutter spaces are almost non-existent in this page to indicate the congestion in a big city. The sound of traffic runs across the panels to signal on-going noise. The woman and her speech balloons extend into the gutter to graphically emphasize her shouts and frantic movements.

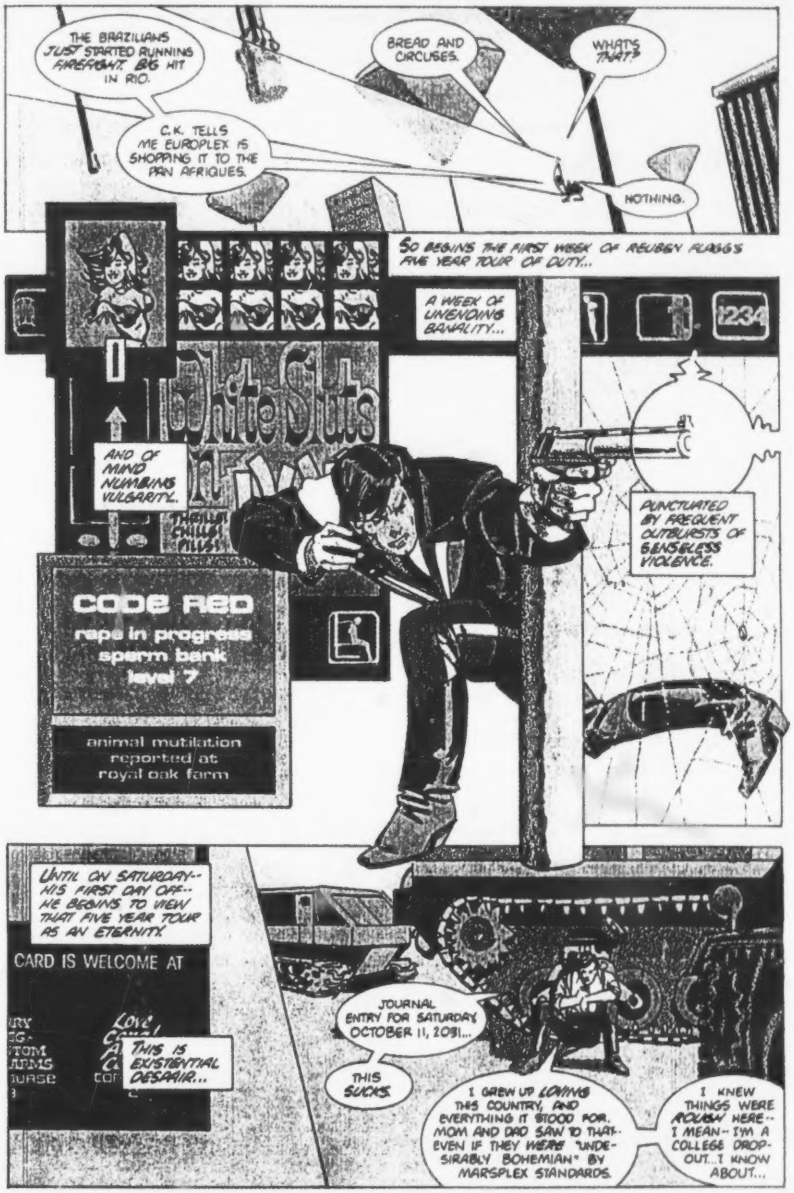
Appendix 21


ROCCO I DID IT!! LIKE YOU TOL' ME I'M GONNA BE A BIG MAN RIGHT ?

(Will Eisner 1985: 72)

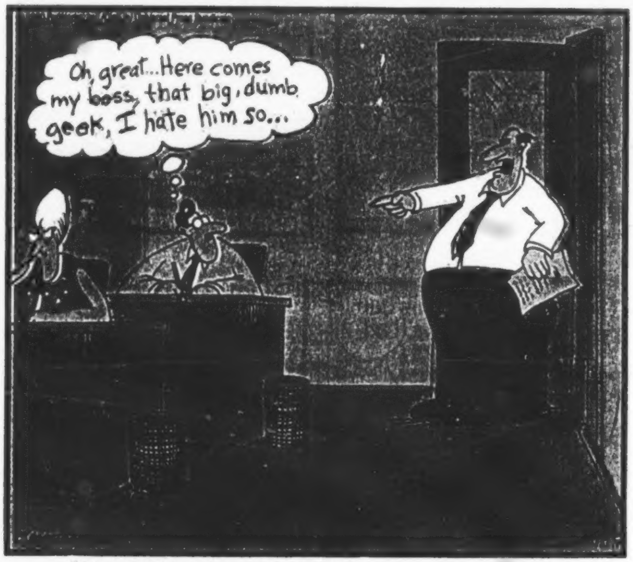
The cloth line used to separate the first and second row of panels also serves as an escape device for the fugitive. In the center row, Eisner also manages to depict succeeding moments without any change or break in the brick wall. Hands drawn beyond the panel lines highlight the pointing, accusing motion of the people.

Appendix 22


THE BRAZILIANS JUST STARTED RUNNING FIREFIGHT. BIG HIT IN RIO.
BREAD AND CIRCUSES.
WHAT'S THAT?
C.K. TELLS ME EUROPLEX IS SHOPPING IT TO THE PAN AFRIQUES.
NOTHING.
SO BEGINS THE FIRST WEEK OF REUBEN FLAGG'S FIVE YEAR TOUR OF DUTY...
A WEEK OF UNENDING BANALITY...
AND OF MIND NUMBING VULGARITY...
PUNCTUATED BY FREQUENT OUTBURSTS OF SENSELESS VIOLENCE.
1234
White Sluts
THRILLS! CHILLS! PILLS!
CODE RED
rape in progress
sperm bank
level 7
animal mutilation
reported at
royal oak farm
UNTIL ON SATURDAY-- HIS FIRST DAY OFF-- HE BEGINS TO VIEW THAT FIVE YEAR TOUR AS AN ETERNITY.
CARD IS WELCOME AT
THIS IS EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR...
JOURNAL ENTRY FOR SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2031...
THIS SUCKS.
I GREW UP LOVING THIS COUNTRY, AND EVERYTHING IT STOOD FOR. MOM AND DAD SAW TO THAT-- EVEN IF THEY WERE "UNDESIRABLY BOHEMIAN" BY MARSPLEX STANDARDS.
I KNEW THINGS WERE ROUGH HERE-- I MEAN-- I'M A COLLEGE DROP-OUT...I KNOW ABOUT...

(Howard Chaykin, *American Flagg! #2* in Sabin 1993: 89)

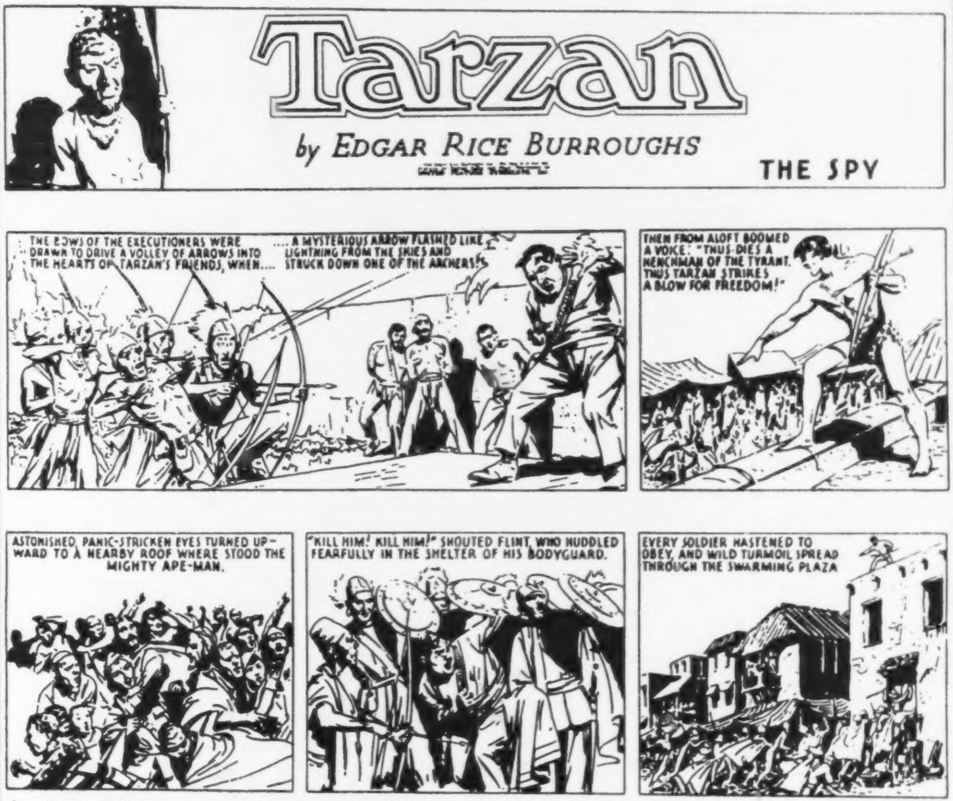
Chaykin is known for his innovative total page lay-outs. Above, he shows imaginative intertwining of panel and gutter spaces.


Oh, great...Here comes my boss, that big, dumb geek, I hate him so...

"Oh, yeah? Lewis, you're fired! You apparently forgot this is a cartoon, and I can read every word you think!"

(Gary Larson, "Far Side," *Edmonton Journal* 14 October 1993)

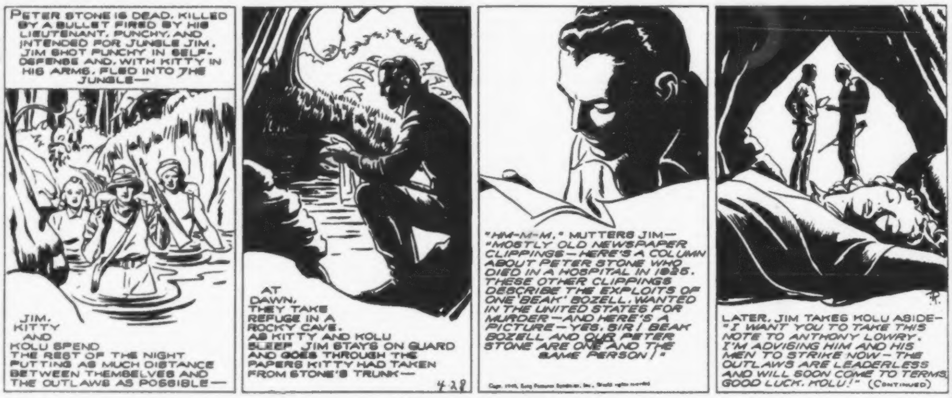
Appendix 24


Tarzan
by EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS
THE SPY
THE BOWS OF THE EXECUTIONERS WERE DRAWN TO DRIVE A VOLLEY OF ARROWS INTO THE HEARTS OF TARZAN'S FRIENDS, WHEN....
.... A MYSTERIOUS ARROW FLASHED LIKE LIGHTNING FROM THE SKIES AND STRUCK DOWN ONE OF THE ARCHERS!
THEN FROM ALOFT BOOMED A VOICE: "THUS DIES A HENCHMAN OF THE TYRANT. THUS TARZAN STRIKES A BLOW FOR FREEDOM!"
ASTONISHED, PANIC-STRICKEN EYES TURNED UPWARD TO A NEARBY ROOF WHERE STOOD THE MIGHTY APE-MAN.
"KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" SHOUTED FLINT, WHO HUDDLED FEARFULLY IN THE SHELTER OF HIS BODYGUARD.
EVERY SOLDIER HASTENED TO OBEY, AND WILD TURMOIL SPREAD THROUGH THE SWARMING PLAZA

(H. Foster, *Tarzan* in G. Perry and A. Aldridge 1967: 48)

More narration if required without the use of speech balloons which issue directly from the character's mouth or thought. The intrusion of a narrator's voice is also evident, especially in the use of "Tarzan said," or "they shouted," etc. The caption also includes the tone of the expression, as in frame two: "...BOOMED A VOICE" rather than being rendered graphically if speech balloons were used.

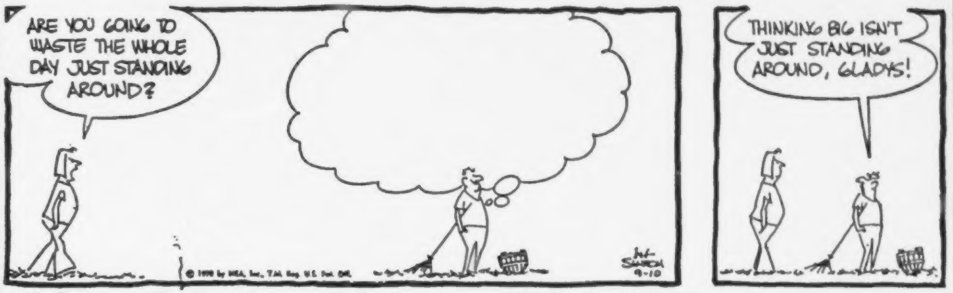
Appendix 25


PETER STONE IS DEAD, KILLED BY A BULLET FIRED BY HIS LIEUTENANT, PUNCHY, AND INTENDED FOR JUNGLE JIM. JIM SHOT PUNCHY IN SELF-DEFENSE AND, WITH KITTY IN HIS ARMS, FLED INTO THE JUNGLE—
JIM, KITTY AND KOLU SPEND THE REST OF THE NIGHT PUTTING AS MUCH DISTANCE BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND THE OUTLAWS AS POSSIBLE—
AT DAWN, THEY TAKE REFUGE IN A ROCKY CAVE. AS KITTY AND KOLU SLEEP, JIM STAYS ON GUARD AND GOES THROUGH THE PAPERS KITTY HAD TAKEN FROM STONE'S TRUNK—
4-28
"HM-M-M," MUTTERS JIM— "MOSTLY OLD NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS—HERE'S A COLUMN ABOUT PETER STONE WHO DIED IN A HOSPITAL IN 1925. THESE OTHER CLIPPINGS DESCRIBE THE EXPLOITS OF ONE 'BEAK' BOZELL, WANTED IN THE UNITED STATES FOR MURDER—AND HERE'S A PICTURE—YES, SIR! BEAK BOZELL AND OUR PETER STONE ARE ONE AND THE SAME PERSON!"
LATER, JIM TAKES KOLU ASIDE— "I WANT YOU TO TAKE THIS NOTE TO ANTHONY LOWRY. I'M ADVISING HIM AND HIS MEN TO STRIKE NOW—THE OUTLAWS ARE LEADERLESS AND WILL SOON COME TO TERMS. GOOD LUCK, KOLU!" (CONTINUED)

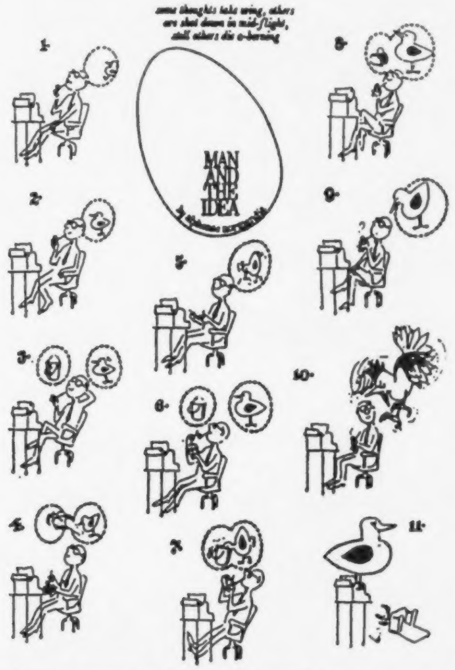
(A. Raymond, *T. U.* in R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs 1976: 226)

The illustrations in this strip are almost static; however, the narrative text functions well in moving the story forward. In the last frame, the text helps to direct the reader's attention to the letter Jim is holding even if the figure of the woman is up close and occupies half of the frame.

Appendix 26


ARE YOU GOING TO WASTE THE WHOLE DAY JUST STANDING AROUND?
THINKING BIG ISN'T JUST STANDING AROUND, GLADYS!

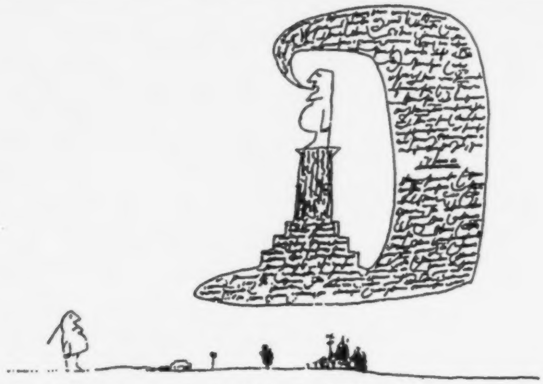
(A. Samson, *The Born Loser* in R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs 1976: 57)


some thoughts take wing, others are shot down in mid-flight, still others die a-borning
MAN AND THE IDEA
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.

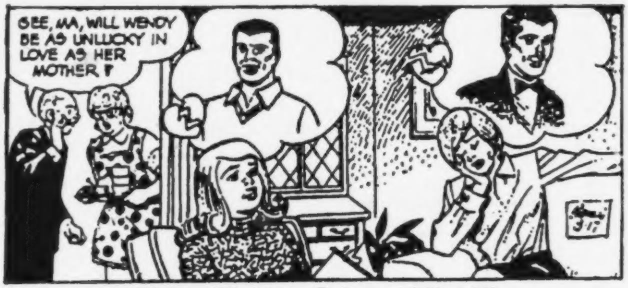
(A. Normandia, *Man and the Idea* in Gubern 1972: 149)

In strips like these, the use of the balloons is the whole point of the joke or the story. There is the interchange between the use of linguistic and graphic signs. In the top strip, the balloon is wordless and remains a graphic representation of "thinking big." In the next strip, graphic signs are used in what should have been spaces for text.

Appendix 27

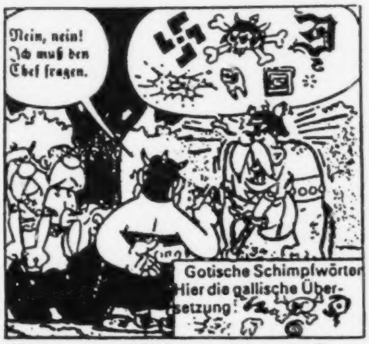


(Saül Steinberg, *n. t.* in Gubern 1972: 152)



GEE, MA, WILL WENDY BE AS UNLUCKY IN LOVE AS HER MOTHER ?

(M. Branner, *Winnie Winkle* in Gubern 1972: 147)

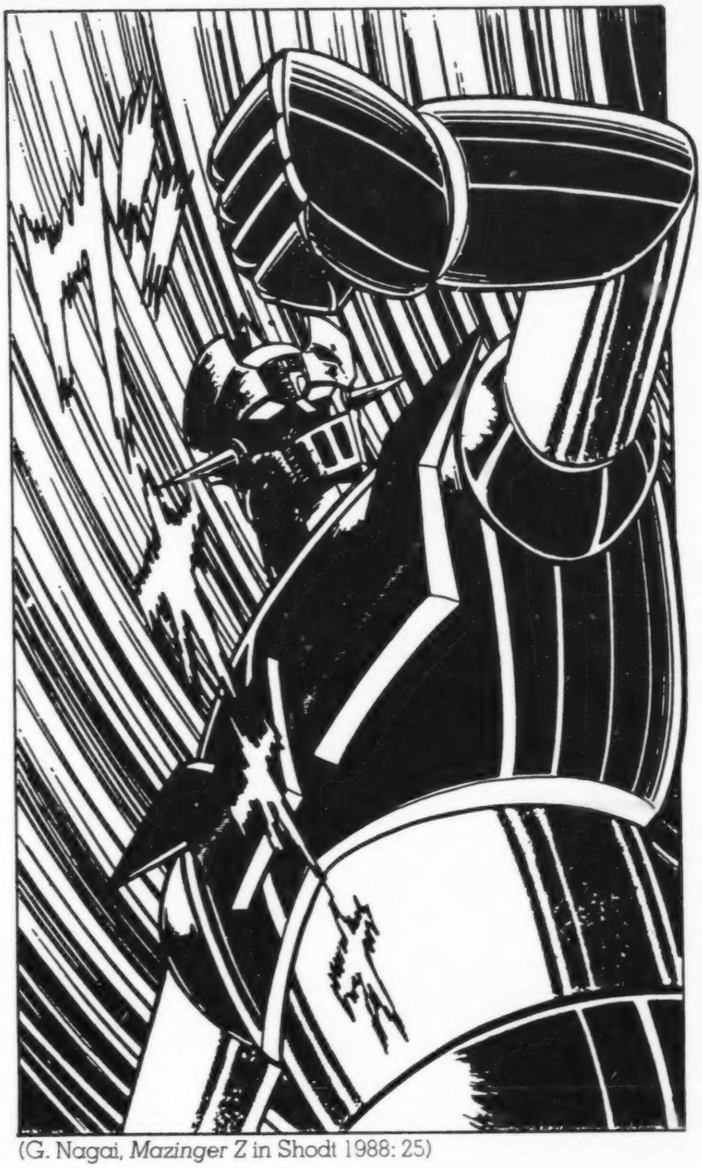


Nein, nein! Ich muß den Chef fragen.
Gotische Schimpfwörter Hier die gallische Übersetzung!

(Goscinny and Uderzo, *Asterix* in G. Perry and A. Aldridge1967: 37)

These three vignettes are some examples, among many, of how the interplay of words and images may be enjoyed both by the artist and the readers. In these examples, the "text" inside the characters' balloons would be hard to transcribe phonetically.

Appendix 28

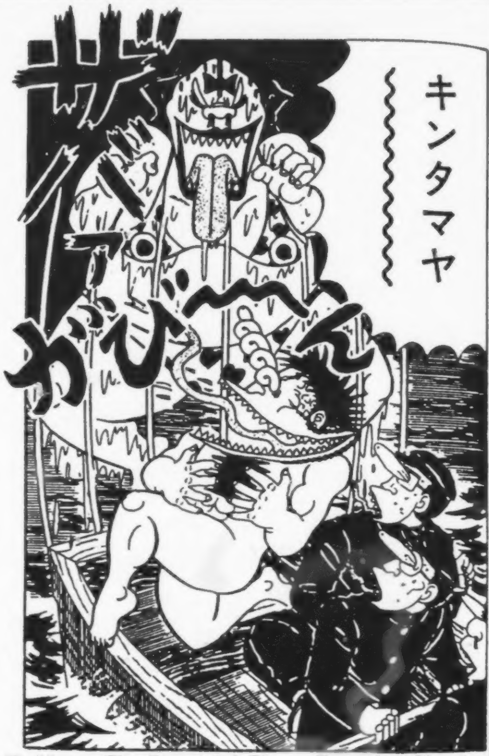


(G. Nagai, *Mazinger Z* in Shodt 1988: 25)

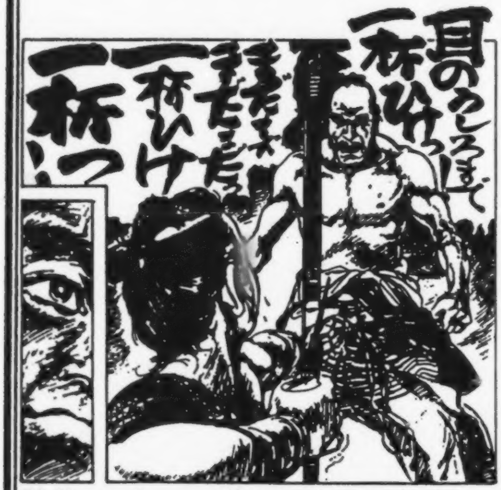
The choice of Japanese comic strip artists between four styles of script and three ways of writing it in a page allow for a very flexible layout (see this and appendix 30).
GUOOOOO! With a vertical roar written in the angular *Katakana* script, Mazinger Z menacingly moves into action.

Appendix 29

Again, an example of the use of various script depending on the tone of voice by the character, and the situation.


キンタマヤ
ザブァ
がびーん

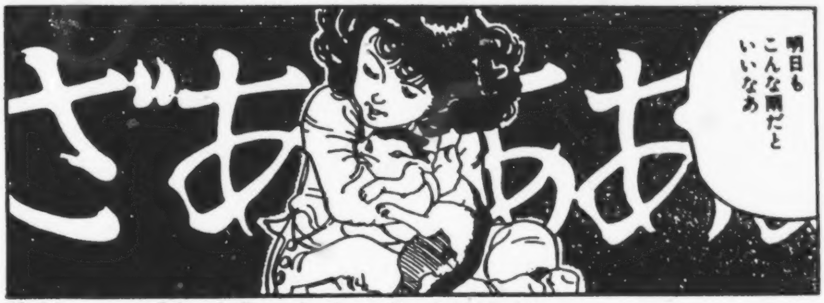
(D. Hana, *The Beautiful Cheer Squad* in Shodt 1988: 128)


目のくろうまで
一杯ひけっ!
まだまだ まだだ!
一杯ひけ
一杯っ!

(H. Hirata, *Samurai Spirit* in Shodt 1988: 22)

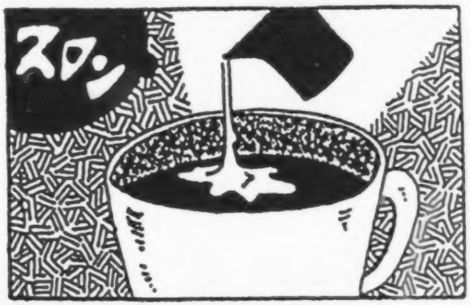
Hirata is one of the very few comic artists in Japan still using calligraphy for dialogue.

Appendix 30


ざあああ
明日もこんな雨だといいなあ

(S. Morimura, *Adam's Stray Locks* in Shodt 1988: 24)

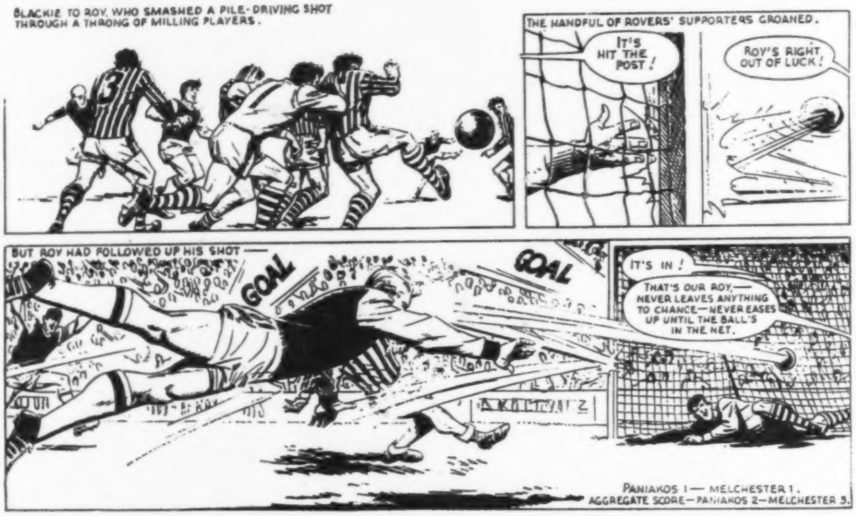
The sound of heavy rain, written in the cursive Hiragana script, serves as the background.



(Kawasaki, *Strange Comic Tales* in Shodt 1988: 27)

In studies between comics and the cinema, sound effects and motion are the two most distinguishing elements. The comics make up for its lack of actual sound by playing with onomatopoeiac words and turning these into images to approximate the sounds the artists want.
In Western comics, the sound effects so far are close to that of the real ones; but Japanese comics even have sounds for those actions without any sound in real life.

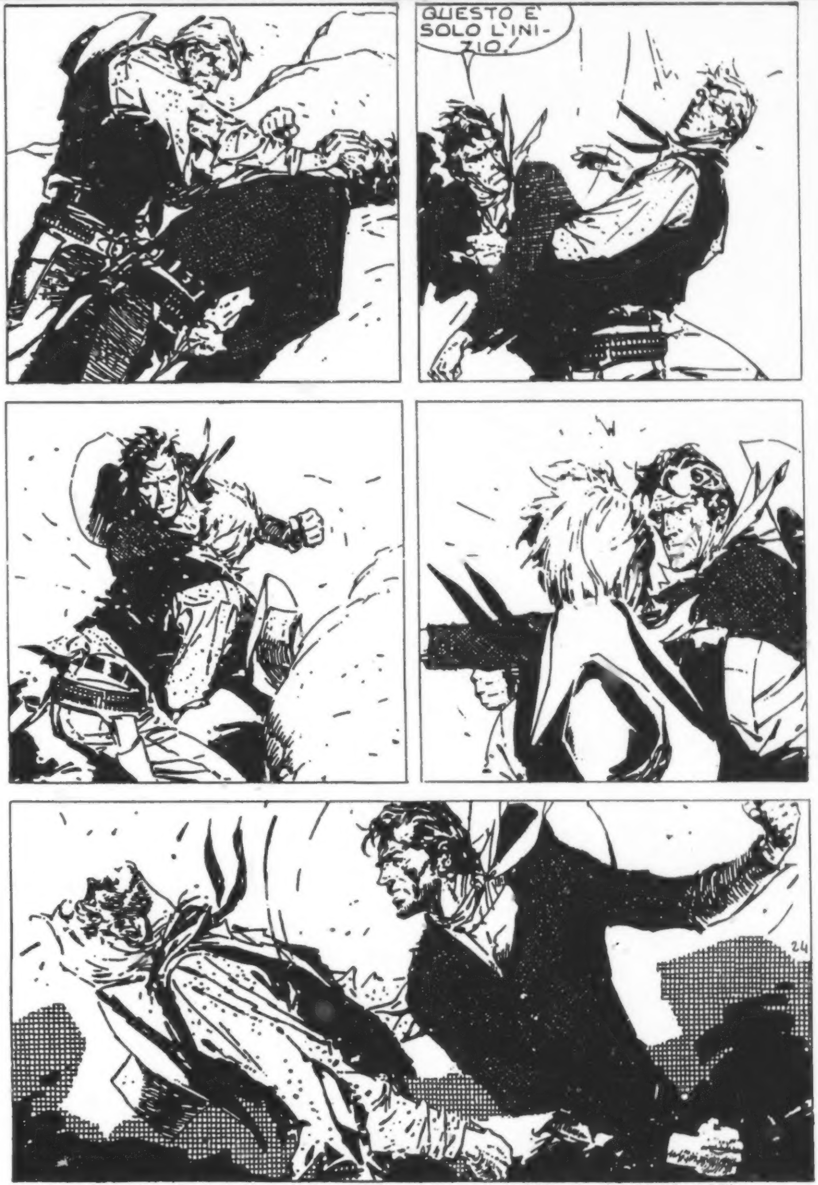
Appendix 31


BLACKIE TO ROY, WHO SMASHED A PILE-DRIVING SHOT THROUGH A THRONG OF MILLING PLAYERS.
THE HANDFUL OF ROVERS' SUPPORTERS GROANED.
IT'S HIT THE POST!
ROY'S RIGHT OUT OF LUCK!
BUT ROY HAD FOLLOWED UP HIS SHOT —
GOAL
GOAL
IT'S IN!
THAT'S OUR ROY,— NEVER LEAVES ANYTHING TO CHANCE—NEVER EASES UP UNTIL THE BALL'S IN THE NET.
PANIAKOS 1— MELCHESTER 1.
AGGREGATE SCORE—PANIAKOS 2—MELCHESTER 3.

(N. A., *Roy of the Rovers* in R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs 1972: 204)

The accompanying texts here complement the images: both narration and dialogue describe the action illustrated by the drawings. The use of speech balloons allowed the close-ups in the second and third frames in a more direct way, appropriate to the action of the strip than a caption would have done.

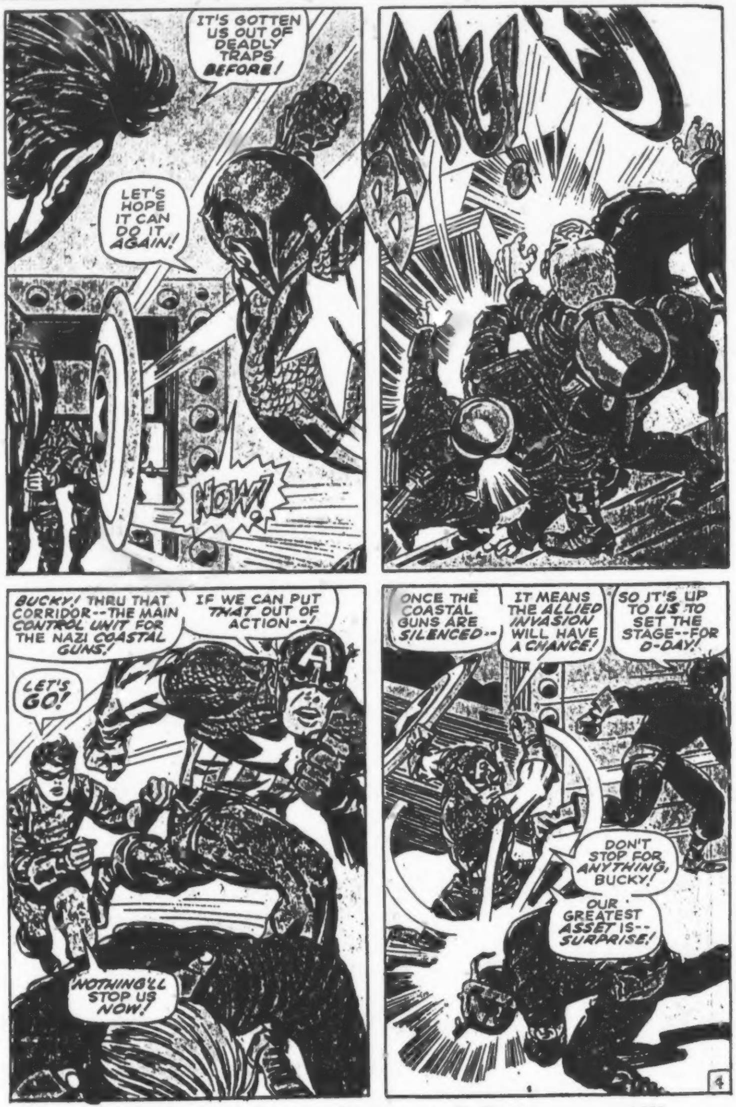
Appendix 32



(A. del Castillo, *Ralph Kendall* in R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs 1972: 197)

The absence of text and dialogue in this sequence makes the fight go faster than the scene in Appendix 34, when in actuality, the two might have happened within the same duration.

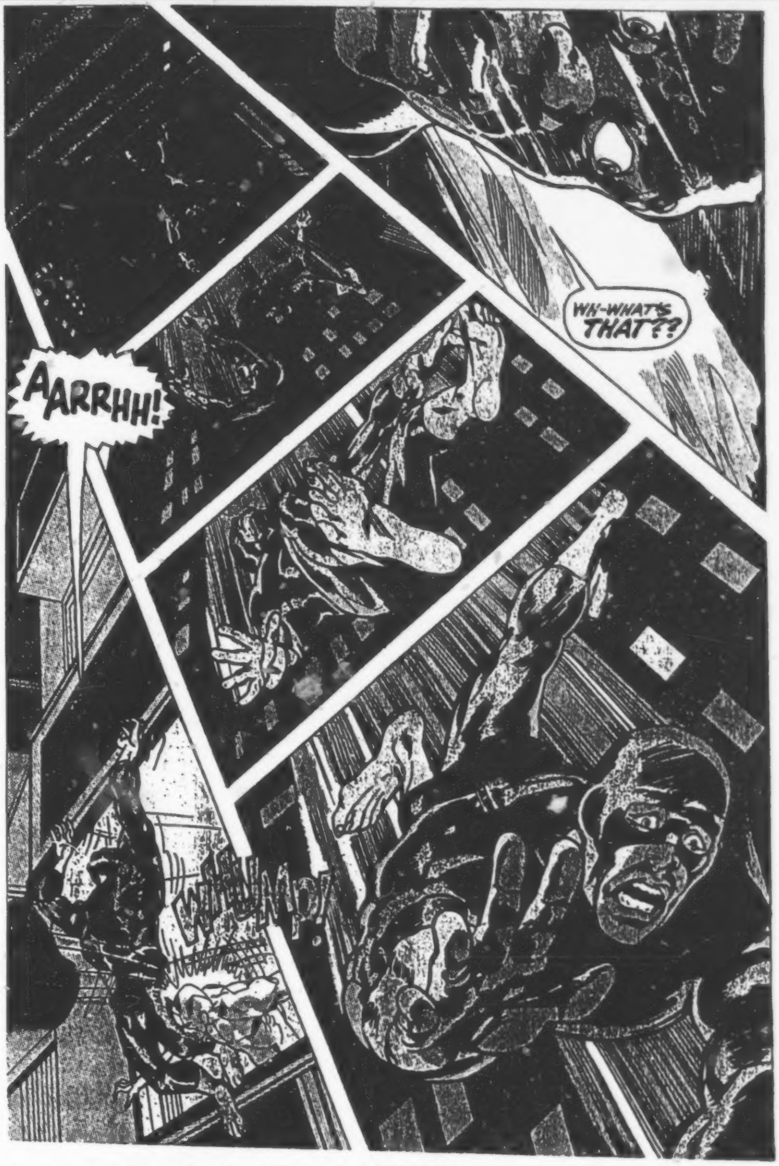
Appendix 33


IT'S GOTTEN US OUT OF DEADLY TRAPS BEFORE!
LET'S HOPE IT CAN DO IT AGAIN!
NOW!
BUCKY! THRU THAT CORRIDOR--THE MAIN CONTROL UNIT FOR THE NAZI COASTAL GUNS!
IF WE CAN PUT THAT OUT OF ACTION--!
LET'S GO!
NOTHING'LL STOP US NOW!
ONCE THE COASTAL GUNS ARE SILENCED--
IT MEANS THE ALLIED INVASION WILL HAVE A CHANCE!
SO IT'S UP TO US TO SET THE STAGE--FOR D-DAY!
DON'T STOP FOR ANYTHING, BUCKY!
OUR GREATEST ASSET IS--SURPRISE!
4

(J. Kirby and S. Shores, *Captain America* in R. Reitberger and W. Fuchs 1972: 112)

Paradox of the presence of text in comics: while it serves to move the story forward, it also delays the reading. It takes longer to read this strip than the scene in appendix 33, although the fight may have taken the same length of time. However, there is more information in this strip for constructing a story.

Appendix 34

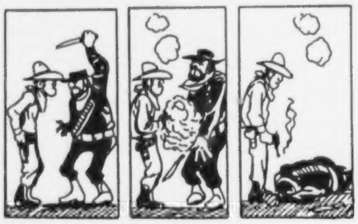

AARRHH!
WH-WHAT'S THAT??

(N. Adams, *Daredevil* in L Daniels 1993: 161)

There are many artists who continually experiment with panel lay-out. Regardless of their originality, the reading order and assumed eye movement remain as restrictions to be observed.

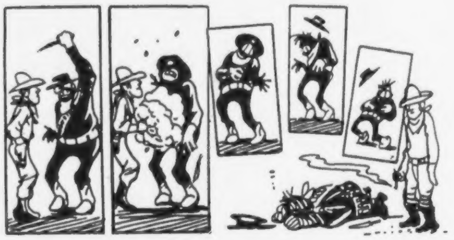
Appendix 35

TIME



A simple action whose result is immediate . . . seconds.
(Eisner 1986: 25)

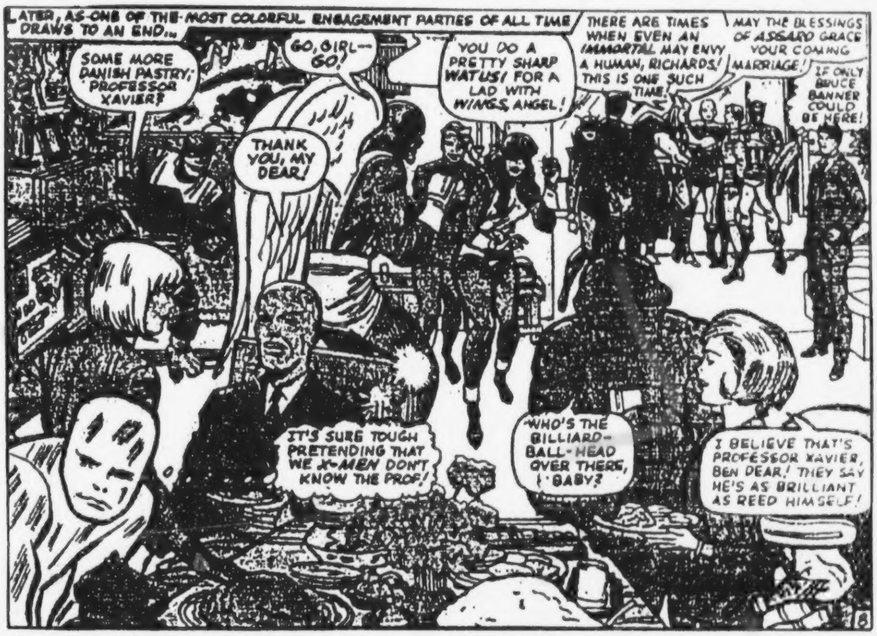
TIMING



A simple action wherein the result (only) is extended to enhance emotion

The phenomenon of duration and its experience--commonly referred to as "time"--is a dimension intergral to sequential art. In comics, it is an essential structural element spatially perceived and signalled through a host of conventions--the size of the panels, the number of panels in a sequence, the presence of text, and the content illustration of each panel. They all function not only to signal time elapsed but to control the unfolding of the narrative.

Appendix 36


LATER, AS ONE OF THE MOST COLORFUL ENGAGEMENT PARTIES OF ALL TIME DRAWS TO AN END...
SOME MORE DANISH PASTRY, PROFESSOR XAVIER?
GO, GIRL-- GO!
THANK YOU, MY DEAR!
YOU DO A PRETTY SHARP WATUSI FOR A LAD WITH WINGS, ANGEL!
THERE ARE TIMES WHEN EVEN AN IMMORTAL MAY ENVY A HUMAN, RICHARDS! THIS IS ONE SUCH TIME!
MAY THE BLESSINGS OF ASGARD GRACE YOUR COMING MARRIAGE!
IF ONLY BRUCE BANNER COULD BE HERE!
IT'S SURE TOUGH PRETENDING THAT WE X-MEN DON'T KNOW THE PROF!
WHO'S THE BILLIARD-BALL-HEAD OVER THERE, BABY?
I BELIEVE THAT'S PROFESSOR XAVIER, BEN DEAR! THEY SAY HE'S AS BRILLIANT AS REED HIMSELF!
8

(Stan Lee, *The Fantastic Four* in Les Daniels 1993: 124)

An example of a long panel where each segment comes alive only as the reader moves from left to right and reads the speech balloons. Yet there is the illusion of perceiving the whole panel as one depicting a unified scene of a lively party.

Appendix 37

A Note Regarding Appendices 38 to 66

Due to copyright restrictions, Appendices 38 to 66 have not been included in this copy. The original source material for each appendix, as well descriptions about its content, are included in the main body of the thesis as footnotes (see particularly Chapters Four and Five).